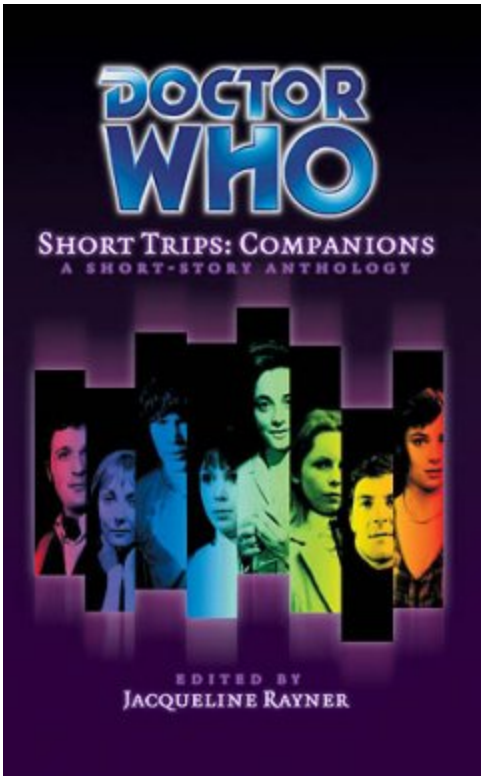
DOCTOR WHO

SHORT TRIPS: COMPANIONS

A SHORT-STORY ANTHOLOGY

EDITED BY

JACQUELINE RAYNER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The Tip of the Mind

Peter Anghelides

As I always say, when faced with a tough decision, I'm not afraid to grasp the nettle. That's my little joke about the UrtiCorp Project. It sounds like urtica, or nettle, do you see? Well, I suppose you'd spot it at once if you too had got a good lower-second degree. ' find a bit of wordplay amuses visitors to this facility. You need to put them at their ease, sometimes, they're not always used to a deep space station.

And that's second nature to a woman of my calibre. I've built my research group up from nothing, best of all of them here on XZ49.

Don't talk to me about the Pulsar team, they're kids in the park. You only have to look around at the lovely new furniture in our UrtiCorp offices to see how I've looked after my team. Pulsar? Don't make me laugh, ever since they produced their research results, they've had their best staff poached by the top universities elsewhere in this Sector. My team's had flat funding, flat headcount, zero attrition for six years. Six years! And look at the walnut surface on this desk. Holographics got their furnishings hand-me-down when Earth Central closed XF24.

'Making the most of our investment credit,' said Professor Akermore, sat behind his cheap metal desk. Stainless steel? I think that's a sign of something, an admission of failure, don't you? 'Second-hand is

second-rate; my mother always says. She meant research work, but the point's the same.

So, start of the week, and I'm reviewing the calendar with Ms Xafta, my admin assistant. ' don't like to call her my secretary, she's not one of those typists who spends half the day doing her nails. She does do typing. (But my honorary doctorate job grade is Beta-Plus, so you'd expect that.) She's one of those Fodorans. Shocking pale blue skin, of course, but I pride myself I can work with anyone.

Things have been a bit out of kilter since I talked with Zoe Heriot this morning. Strictly speaking, she was talking to Tobik. She hasn't mentioned it to me, I know she doesn't like to worry her boss. She was telling him about her dreams again. Wasn't the mushroom this time, it was something about being trapped in a rocket, drifting towards the 1

sun. I would have tackled her about it straight away, except as I was leaning backwards out of my chair to listen to her a bit more clearly I must have caught my dataport with my elbow, and when I'd picked it up again and checked it hadn't scratched the walnut, she and Tobik had already left the outer office. 1 wonder what's brought those on again,' I said to myself. But I think I already knew.

At this point in the day, all being as usual, i.e. assuming that we've had no interruptions from the *hoi polloi* who traipse through here with nothing better to do on their own projects, I'm already ahead of schedule and ready for lunch. Only today, Director Sheerstock visits us, doesn't he. Second time this week, we must be performing

particularly well. I said to him, 'We must be performing particularly well, Director.' He smiled at me. 'I don't want to catch people doing things wrong, Dr Urtiman,' he told me, try to catch you doing things right. Doing things *right.* ' And he moved on before I could show him the new cupboards. He's started to grow his sideburns, and his short hair has grown back. You can see the grey now in the longer bits, I think it really suits him.

'Trying to catch us dawdling at work, more like,' muttered Tobik behind his back as he went. I don't think the Director heard him I told Tobik afterwards: 'Show a bit of respect. 'Oh, respect is it?' said Tobik. I good that Director Sheerstock has a healthy interest in what we're doing. ' He said, 'Well, a healthy interest in some of us, eh?'And he winked at Ms Xafta as though she'd agree with him. But Ms Xafta was busy sorting out a whitlow on her thumb, and Tobik wandered off just laughing at his own daft joke. He shouldn't wear stripes, they make him look fat.

Thought I'd take Zoe to lunch for a *tête-à-tête*, but No Sign Of.

She's working too hard. She may be the sparkliest star in our bright little cluster at UrtiCorp, but where's she going with it? It's all an academic interest for her, what she needs is someone with the know-how to get it beyond the Groves of Academe, someone who can *sell* it.

I can grasp the nettle, get the funding and the equipment to keep us

going year-in, year-out. I'm not the technical expert myself I just bring it out of them. Though I have my third prize and a Highly Commended from the Drazah Institute, back when I was at the Toinbi Polytechnic.

I've had another call from the Bartali Foundation. Seven months now since I told them Zoe might be available in another half a year, and could they talk? Well, I won't let Zoe be distracted at this crucial stage, so I didn't worry her about it. I told Bartali that she'd started down an exciting new avenue and would they care to make a fresh approach after the long holidays?

I hurried down to the refectory and got the last seat on the big middle

table. Tobik wasn't there, probably running around the outer perimeter of the station to forestall the incipient paunch. I'm light-boned, and I eat sensibly, so I hardly need to worry about my figure. I squeezed in on the middle table. Grumbles from Holographics, Professor Akermore with a face like thunder, and need I add that the Swinson twins were acting the fool at the far end As Per? But when I look across, there's Zoe, with her glass of water and a limp salad. She gave me that little half-smile of hers that she does when she's grateful, and I could tell immediately that I'd spared her a tedious half-hour with Akermore.

'Hello, Dr Urtiman,' said Zoe. She likes to use my formal title. We're on first-name terms on the station, mostly, but none of my team call me Sandra. It's not a lack of affection, it's just their way of showing respect for my authority.

Anyway, Zoe's picking silently at her lollo rosso while I try to keep the conversation alive. At one stage Assistant Director Bosmial came past, but he declined my invitation to budge up and let him join us.

(Another dark look from Akermore.) 'Spurn my advances, A. D.,' I laughed. He said, 'I still have my back, Dr Urtiman. So I'll not stop and sit. Only he must have got bullied into it by Director Sheerstock, because a moment later he's dragging a chair across to the next table. I saw Ms Xafta budge up closer to the Director to make space.

Zoe must be working too hard, she was yawning practically all the way through lunch. I asked her about the temporal experiments, but she was non-committal. 'You missed the Director this morning,' I told her,

‘any news for him?’

‘No,’ said Zoe, ‘I wasn’t around because I was in a different

meeting. And my research notes are up here.’ She tapped her temple.

Mind you, I noticed she’d been doodling on her paper serviette.

I reached across and held her other hand. ‘It’s all very well having an identic memory, but I can’t e-mail your brain, child.’

‘It’s eidetic,’ she said.

‘What is?’ I say.

‘Eidetic memory,’ she said, ‘photographic. I see and I don’t forget.’

‘Well,’ I replied, ‘you seem to forget to join me at lunch half the time.’

I’m just finishing my other slice of cheesecake when I ask about the dreams. I wanted to draw her out on the latest one without asking her directly, not to embarrass her, so I inquired about the mushroom again.

The others are always teasing her about it, she keeps dreaming about spinning around in a foggy glade on a giant metal mushroom.

‘Leave the girl alone, Sandra,’ said Professor Akermore.

‘Well, I’ll thank you to keep your own staff in line, Professor,’ I said, and I looked down the table at the twins. That noisy pair had 3

twisted round towards A. D. Bosmial, who was now leaning back his chair to hear them mumbling something and laughing.

‘What different meeting?’I said to Zoe.

Seems she’s been talking to a visiting academic. Doesn’t say where from. I said, ‘Not discussing your temporal research, I hope?’

She said, ‘No, Dr Urtiman.’

‘Because’, I said, ‘that would be unprofessional and a breach of security.’

Up pipes Professor Akermore again uninvited: ‘Security?’ His voice goes all high-pitched when he’s agitated. ‘I was under the impression

that our funding arrangements made us an open educational

environment,' he squeaked at me.

'I meant a breach of etiquette,' I told him in a sharp tone, and could I trouble him to pass the sugar?

I explained to Zoe that she didn't know this so-called academic, he could be fishing for information, stealing her unpublished ideas. Mind you, by now I was thinking to myself that this could be a way to get her to document her research better. And at the same time, I was worrying that those buggers from Bartali were trying to come in through the back door. I can multitask like that, it's a gift.

'He offered ideas,' said Zoe, and she looked at me properly for the first time since I sat down. 'He talked about his own work. It's like we think along the same lines. He's got an idea for a visual stabiliser circuit to make objects invisible. And he says he's prototyped a short-range transmitting device.'

I said, 'That's nothing new since T-Mat.'

She said, 'This is a safety device, he calls it a Hostile Action Displacement System. We hardly touched on temporal theory,' she said, 'but it was all very interesting. Just the sorts of things I've been thinking about,' she said, 'stuff on the tip of my mind.'

I squeezed her hand. 'Perhaps you should introduce me to this

anonymous academic, Zoe,' I said calmly, 'I am the UrtiCorp team leader. '

'If you like; she said, 'but he mentioned that he wouldn't be here for long. I'm not sure whether he's even on the station any longer. And he's not anonymous, his name is Smith. Dr John Smith.'

This evening, back in my own room, I've sat here into the early hours and thought about the Bartali Foundation. There's another message from mother on the videolink, but I've not answered it.

I said to Ms Xafta, 'I thought someone was having a joke. I got fourteen requisition confirmations. All for the same thing. Waste-paper baskets. Look.' She was just back from bringing files across from
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Director Sheerstock's office (I didn't know he wanted any) and she

barely looked up.

She said, ‘Is someone hacking your furniture database? Or is that old boy in stores flirting with you again?’

I said, ‘Flirting, with waste-paper baskets? No, Ms Xafta, I think not.

Desk tidies, you could understand it.’

She was busy with her display screen now ‘Your mother called,’ she said, ‘are you available for a midday call?

‘No,’ I said firmly, ‘please advise *Vice-chancellor Urtiman* that I am not available, I am indisposed. Else, in a planning meeting.’

I think I made my point. She can be too casual, can Ms Xafta.

Thinks she could run this place herself; given half a chance. Not that she’ll get it, to her it’s ‘all just paperwork’, bless. Doesn’t understand we’re at the Cutting Edge, we don’t have paper. Except for printing my calendar every day, because I can’t be doing with that handheld thing.

And it’s not paperwork, it’s formal authorisations for purchase.

Though I don’t suppose they make that distinction in the Fodoran system.

‘So,’ said Ms Xafta, ‘was it the old boy in stores? Flirting?’

‘No,’ I said, ‘a mail server had gone down in Costings. What else have we got on this afternoon?’

Ms Xafta said, ’Here’s your printout.’

As soon as I read the room booking sheet, I practically fled from my office. Didn’t even take my fresh cup of tea. When I got to the meeting room, there was Zoe and Tobik in the new conference chairs. (Solid oak, worth every credit we paid for them.) And in another chair... him.

Lots of untidy white hair, great big nose, face like an unmade bed.

Jacket in blue velvet, like the cushions I’ve ordered for the settee in my office.

I waited for a moment to hear what they were saying. Not my field, but I got the gist: time-travel theory, materialisation codes, that sort of

thing. I knew the style, he seemed to be offering lots of information but in fact he was asking all the questions, and Zoe and Tobik were answering him like kids in school. They were looking at some sketches and doodles that Zoe'd done on scraps of paper, and he asked her why she hadn't written any papers on the subject. She's explaining about keeping it all in her identic memory, when Tobik spots me in the doorway and starts to cough.

'Oh, Dr Urtiman, ' said Zoe. I can see she's surprised to see me. She said, 'This is Dr Smith.'

I said, quite calm: 'Were you going to call me?'

I'm sorry,' she said, 'I forgot.'

In a trice, Dr Smith was all over me like a rash. 'How d'you do, my 5

dear Dr Urtiman? So pleased to finally meet you. What a splendid set-up you have here, such hospitable and brilliant staff.'

I gave him a look until he shut up. I said, 'None of your Old Earth charm, if you don't mind. My staff are very busy. Miss Heriot in particular. You're the outsider here, who gave you authority to visit my group?'

He stared straight at me, bold as you like. 'I was under the

impression that XZ49 was run under the auspices of *Galactic Studium Generale*, and therefore open to "outsiders". In fact, doesn't your funding require that?'

I thought of how my mother would deal with this interloper, and I said: 'You are thinking of Parmenio, and I of Alexander?

The infuriating man smiled even more widely at this. 'Good point, Sandra,' he said, 'and truer than you probably realise.' He smoothed down his velvet jacket. 'From whom should I seek permission to

pursue my academic interest here?' he asked.

'From me,' I said, 'and I can tell you now we're too busy. I have some influence here, you know.'

'In that case,' he said, 'Perhaps I should discuss it with Benedict.

Good day to you, madam: He stuck out his bony hand, but I didn't shake it. His frilly shirt cuffs were sticking out of his jacket, they

looked like hankies up his sleeves. He must have sensed my sartorial contempt from the chill of my expression, because he strode straight out of the meeting room, his tail between his legs.

'Benedict?' said Tobik, 'D'you think he knows Director Sheerstock well? Maybe we should ask Ms Xafta.' Another of his silly smirks.

'And who are Alexander and Parchesi when they're at home?'

Honestly, I wonder sometimes where I got him from.

Trust Zoe, though, she said, 'I read about them in Earth History.

Parmenio was a general of Alexander the Great. Emperor Alexander told him that he didn't consider what reward or punishment Parmenio should get, but what Alexander should give. So Parmenio thought of what people ought to receive, while Alexander had to decide what was consistent with his own position and rank. '

I said, 'Yes, all right, Zoe, you can write us ancient news reports on the day that the *Hourly Telepress* runs a regular column on causality spirals, but in the meantime I'd rather read your project write-up.' I can see she's got that faraway look in her eye again, so I told her firmly,

'Don't get sidetracked by that Dr Smith's improper interest in our work.'

Then she tells me that Smith reminds her of another doctor she met, on the Wheel, years ago. 'And there's something else,' she said, 'it's on the tip of my mind.'

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'Oh, like your temporal equations work, then,' I said, 'isn't it obvious, Zoe? The two men seem similar because they're both

doctors,' I said sarcastically, 'your logic's irrefutable.'

She said: 'Logic merely enables one to be wrong with authority.'

I said, 'That is your Dr Smith's smart tongue talking, young lady.'

'No,' she says, 'that was something the other doctor told me.'

'I see your memory's working again,' I said pointedly, 'so get that report on my desk by the end of the day. Perhaps you can start with

those sketches of yours.' But when I look on the meeting room table, I realise that Smith must have taken them with him.

'End of the day, if you please,' I repeated. Zoe gave me one of her looks. The sort that suggested I'd ruined her whole week. I wondered whether I might have been a bit harsh, but then she can't have been all that upset. I mean, I could hear her and Tobik laughing together again as soon as I was out of the door, so no harm done.

Now that I'm back in my own office, I suddenly remember Smith's comment. 'Good point, Sandra, ' he'd said in a tone which made me wish I'd not mentioned it. And then I thought to myself, I don't remember telling him my first name.

Look at this cup of tea on my desk, it's stone cold. And it's left a ring on the surface, I do hope that'll come out of the walnut.

Did I think I was *stretching* her enough? That's what he asked me.

Stretching her! Where else in this Sector is she going to get brand-new equipment, tip-top social amenities and a personal desk made of real wood?

I got straight in to see Director Sheerstock that afternoon, Ms Xafta is somehow always able to pull a few strings. His office suite is in the central hub, finished in modern materials. Contemporary, not my taste, but I don't dislike his flooring. He likes to stand looking out of his big picture window, probably gazing wistfully in the general direction of station

XB38, our more prestigious local counterpart in the next Sector. The window's got a solar filter, so that the sun silhouettes him, makes it impossible to see the expression on his face. With the longer sideburns, his ears don't stick out as much.

The Assistant Director showed me in, but didn't leave. 'Don't mind Bosmial,' said Director Sheerstock, 'we have no secrets, Susan. We have no secrets.

'Sandra,' I said.

'Indeed,' he replied, 'what was it you wanted? We have four minutes before my next appointment. '

No shilly-shallying, I grasped the nettle. I told the Director straight 7

about this Dr Smith. I made it clear that I didn't want Smith poking his pointy nose into Zoe Heriot's important research on the UrtiCorp Project. He might be trying to poach ideas from her. Worse, he might be trying to poach Zoe from me. I didn't want him anywhere near her, this dandy interloper, this outsider. And that's when the Director asked me: 'Do you think you're *stretching* her enough, Susan?'

Well, as you can imagine, that stung a bit. I was baffled, hurt. I hardly knew where to look, so I stared at the Assistant Director, looking for his support. But A.D. Bosmial was balancing plastic cups in a tower shape on the brushed titanium conference table. I thought, you've got a double-starred degree in Endocrinology, you're a

heartbeat from the directorship, your boyfriend's in the top ten at zero-G squash, and you're building towers out of plastic cups. I enjoy a bit of fun in the office, but I think there's a time and a place. Eventually I said, 'Zoe Heriot is here to work exclusively on the UrtiCorp Project.

And I only take the best: I thought this might get Bosmial's agreement, but he seemed to have a coughing fit and ended up knocking over his tower of cups. Spots of cold coffee all over the titanium, but it'll wipe.

'We had high hopes for young Zoe when she came here, despite her recent history,' said Director Sheerstock. He's flicking over some information on his datapad. 'Strong on logic, eidetic memory, pure maths. She did a good job of the tidy-up on W3 after... hmmm Security clearance alpha for the rest of this, but I think you catch my drift, Susan. She's not delivered on that potential.'

Bosmial had woken up again at this point, but only to stir the pot:

'And what about these recurring dreams we hear about? Trapped in a doomed rocket. Atomic blast victims that turn out to be dummies.

Giant spinning mushrooms?' He raised his eyebrows at this point.

I said, 'I think you'll find her practical ideas are top-notch.

Enhancements to the weather control system. A Central Flight Info system with a network of Space Beacons to control hyperdrive space vessels...'

'Precisely my point. Precisely my *point*,' said the Director, and he started looking at another screenful of crib-notes. 'All brilliant ideas, but nothing completed – all started, not delivered. In fact, the last

thing she finished was that piece on nova star predominance, and that was some years back.'

I said: 'My team's academic qualifications are impeccable, Director.

I myself was Highly Commended at the Drazah Institute.'

He said, 'Indeed, I'm sure that work remains unsurpassed in the decade since.' He flicked off his datapad, and stood back against his window.

Bosmial piped up now: 'We hear there have been approaches about 8

Zoe from other institutions, despite the fact that she's not written a paper in the three years she's been here.'

I said, 'She has her research in her head.'

He said, 'A formidable memory, but she needs to put it on paper.'

'Oh, paper?' I said, 'how quaint.'

'You know what I mean,' he said.

I said, 'Quite.'

I didn't like his tone, so I asked his boss, Are you unhappy with the UrtiCorp Project's progress, Director? I've had no complaints from our sponsors.'

'No, no,' said the Director, 'we continue to be grateful for Vice-Chancellor Urtiman's very generous external funding. Why, are you suggesting that we consult her on this matter?'

I said, 'No, I don't think mother needs to be involved at this stage.'

'Well,' he said, 'we seem to be out of time. Perhaps you can close on this with Assistant Director Bosmial. By end of business today, please.' He never used to have all that hair.

Bosmial ushered me through the door like I didn't know where I was going. In the outer office, I could hear the Director's voice coming through the intercom to his admin. 'Show my next appointment in, please.' A white-haired figure unfolded itself from one of the leather chairs against the far wall, and I could see that it was Dr Smith. Well, old man, I was thinking at this point, the Director will be in no mood for you today. Only, it's strange, when I turned back to look at him on

my way out, I could see Dr Smith shaking hands with the Director.

And he was looking really pleased with himself.

This room's getting a bit dark I think it may need another lamp stand, over in this corner.

Once upon a time I had my whole life mapped out. I'd get my degree at the Polytechnic, join my mother's research consortium, and blaze a trail like a brilliant comet across a clear night sky. After I got the third prize (plus Highly Commended) at the Drazah Institute, my mother saw there were other opportunities for me elsewhere. That was when she first brought up XZ49. And now I've built up this research team from scratch. You only have to look around to see how well equipped we are here, you won't see wall-shelving of that quality this side of Galactic Central, it's top-notch. You can see how happy we all are.

Now I know I've found my niche.

So, I was doing my online correspondence, working through the e-mails that Ms Xafta had printed out for me. I'd dashed off some requisition confirmations, and a polite but formal thank-you to A. D.

Bosmial. A couple of daft questions from Tobik (I pencilled in my 9

rejection: 'Can we say "return on investment?" A renitential molecular scanner is out of the question, use the polyphase analyser, it's only three years old remember, or has your win in the round-station run gone completely to your head?'). A bring-forward note from Xafta about my mother's birthday, which I ignored, As Per. I used to choose to forget it, but now I really can't remember. Can't even recall which of her eyes is the replacement one. So I almost missed the short message altogether – only a couple of lines, from Dr Smith. I checked the time, and could see I was already late.

He was waiting in the UrtiCorp project office, tapping his fingers –

tapping them! – on the table top. Do you mind?' I said, 'that's chestnut veneer. You shouldn't be here, it's a breach in station regulations, and where do you think you're going now?'

He was practically out of the room by this point. 'We can't talk here,' he said.

I said: 'Please yourself. Goodbye then.'

He paused in the doorway just long enough to say, ‘Director

Sheerstock says I’m to offer Zoe Heriot a job off-station.’ So then I had to run after him.

It was a fifteen-minute walk with him striding ahead saying nary a word, me traipsing along behind him like a drippy schoolgirl. When he stopped, it was on a service level, in a storage hangar. In a side room there’s a tall blue crate with opening panels, little windows in the top half, odd wording on it.

‘Right, now,’ he said, and scratched the back of his head like he was thinking how to give me bad news.

I caught my breath a bit, and said, ‘Zoe is key to the UrtiCorp Project. She is keeping the information all in her head, it’s all on the tip of her mind. She belongs to me.’

‘Belongs?’ he said.

I said, ‘She belongs *here*. She has no desire to work for you.’

‘That’s not what I said,’ Smith said, ‘Sheerstock told me that I had to persuade you to let her leave.’

‘I told you I have some influence,’ I said.

‘Yes.’ he said, ‘I understand your family are charitable sponsors of the research here.’

‘That’s not what I meant,’ I said.

He said, ‘Well, I wouldn’t say that, exactly.’

‘Oh,’ I said, ‘what would you say?’

He put his hands on his hips, you’d think he thought he was the Karkus or something. ‘I’d say,’ he said, ‘that those temporal equations are on the tip of her mind for a reason.’

‘Tip of her mind is right,’ I said, ‘it is a tip, a right mess, identic 10

memory or not. It’s a jumble of brilliant thoughts, but she’s no ability to get them down on paper. That’s why she needs me.’

‘On the contrary!’ he snapped. He was raising his voice now, losing his cool, ‘Zoe Heriot has a brilliant, *eidetic* memory, trained in a School of

Parapsychology. She's a qualified astrophysicist and

astrometricist. What could possibly render her incapable of recalling key information? Key temporal equations that I need, madam.'

Well, Madam is having none of this. 'You want to poach her for

your own university, Dr Smith.'

'I'm not from a university' he said.

'Well,' I said, 'institute then, else consortium.'

He was obviously taken aback by this, because he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. 'All right,' he said. 'I *have* been sent here. By...

the Temporal Institute. Zoe is a brilliant young woman...'

I gave him a poke in the chest, right in the middle of his stupid frilly shirt, and said: 'You seem to know a lot about her, for an outsider.'

He said, 'Listen to me. I didn't know Zoe was here. But now I

understand why the... Temporal Institute sent me. They must be

allowing me to obtain some information.'

He laughed to himself at this point. Leaned back on the tall blue crate. Stroked his top lip like he was thinking things through. 'Too much of an admission that they were wrong just to let me have it directly. But Zoe must still have it in her head, be struggling to remember it. She'd have memorised it when I first met her years ago.

Before she came here.'

I shook my head. 'Dr Smith, the only thing that she struggles to remember are odd dreams about giant mushrooms or one-eyed killer robots.'

'And that, madam,' he said, 'is why we must be discreet, make our inquiries gentle. Besides, I only want a small amount of

straightforward information. Simple coefficients of simultaneous four-dimensional multilinear equations. Dematerialisation codes.'

'Well.' I said, all sarcastic, 'is *that* all?'

He looked down his great long nose at me. ‘Yes, that’s all. Then I can be on my way. Yes, on my way.’

‘And how,’ I asked, ‘will you get these codes if she’s forgotten them?’

‘Have you paid the slightest attention to what I’ve said to you?

Gentle inquiry,’ he said (not very gently, as it happens). ‘It could be disastrous if she suddenly remembered everything at once, that could have quite the reverse effect. After the sudden flood of memories, it would reimprint the mental conditioning, and she could forget

everything completely again. Permanently. So I need to elicit just the 11

right information, while avoiding strong stimuli. Nothing too

evocative, like memorable smells or sounds, no striking images.’

I said, ‘What are you talking about. Striking images?’

‘Yes, yes,’ he said impatiently, ‘her eidetic memory would latch on to significant visual cues. The TARDIS here for example…’ And his voice trailed away. I looked beyond him, at what he was leaning on.

The blue crate.

Smith tried to do a sort of reassuring smile at me, and sidled around me, away from the crate. ‘Believe me, Dr Urtiman, I don’t want to take her away, that’s just what Sheerstock *said* I should do. Though I think you’d agree with him, the kind of knowledge she’s got locked in that head of hers, well… if she could remember all of it, she’d be one of the leading scientists of her age. Way beyond this untidy set-up,’ he added.

A bit unnecessarily, I thought.

‘Let her abandon her research, and then give away those secrets in her mind?’ I said. ‘Director Sheerstock told you that was what she deserved?’ I was scandalised, I can tell you now.

‘Parmenio and Alexander, Dr Urtiman?’ said Smith: Perhaps he

means that she deserves to decide for herself. ‘Even if that wouldn’t be good for your status on this Project. Oh, don’t look so upset, if she wants to she can stay here forever. I just want to undo the Gordian Knot that’s binding her memories. But I can’t just hack at it with a

sword, like Alexander... that would sever all those memories. Beyond that locked door, her mind's like a well-ordered room. Can't go charging around it like a bull in a china shop.'

I stroked my top lip to suggest I was thinking about it. After about a minute, I said. 'All right, Dr Smith. If you wait here for a few minutes, I'll go and tell Director Sheerstock what we've agreed. After that, I'll come back here to meet you, and we can both return to the Project Office and find Zoe together. '

So, you can imagine Smith's surprise when I fetched up back at his blue box, at his TARDIS, with Zoe in tow. He was not best pleased, obviously. But really, under the circumstances, what else would you expect? It's what Alexander would have done.

That was about four hours ago. I've been sitting here in my office for half that time, staring at the wall, spotting face-shapes in the patterns of the woven tapestries. And looking at the speaker phone.

I keep thinking about my mother. Wondering if I should call her.

I can still remember the furious look in Smith's eyes, even after all this time. At first I'd thought it was concern for Zoe, because he was crouched down beside her where she'd fallen, cradling her head. Then when he looked up at me, it was like he'd slapped my face. I even 12

stepped back, away from him. 'Don't run off, you stupid woman,' he snarled at me. 'Haven't you done enough damage?'

'She's only fainted,' I said, 'as soon as she saw that blue crate of yours. Just gave a little cry, clutched at her head, and fell.'

'Get her a doctor,' he said.

I stayed quite calm, I said. 'I thought you *were* a doctor.'

Smith said, 'Good grief.' And paused, like he was counting to ten.

Until he suddenly shouted, 'Well get a move on, why don't you?'

He'd put her in the recovery position by the time I got back a few minutes later. He was stroking her hair, it looked a bit creepy, he was old enough to be her grandfather. 'I should warn you,' I told him, 'I've called security. Told them that Miss Heriot has been attacked by the outsider.'

He stood up then, towered over me. ‘Would you kindly stop

referring to me as “the outsider”? I know this young woman better than you ever will. Well, knew her, anyway.’ He was staring at his blue box as he said this. ‘You’ve tied up their loose ends for them. Done their dirty work.’

‘Dirty work?’ I said. And he said: ‘They’ve made their point,

they’ve rubbed my nose in it.’

‘In your case,’ I said, ‘that’s some point.’

‘Oh, you wouldn’t understand if I explained,’ he said.

I said, ‘Well, you don’t impress me, Dr Smith. Your Gallifrey

Institute sent you here to get Zoe to work out those time equations for them, and you’ve let them down.’

‘Quite the opposite, madam,’ he said. ‘Careless fools didn’t do things properly in the first place, they underestimated Zoe. Her eidetic memory retained more than they realised. And now I realise why they sent me here. It wasn’t to work out the dematerialisation codes, it was to make quite sure that she’d forget them.’

I shuffled in a bit nearer. Smith got out of the way while I folded up my cardigan and put it under Zoe’s head. We could hear the lift at the end of the corridor opening, and the security team clattering about. ‘I think you’d better leave now,’ I told him, ‘before she comes round.’

‘Maybe that would be best,’ said Smith. He opened one of the tall thin doors in the side of his blue box, and squeezed his tall thin body inside. I almost laughed at the thought of him hiding in there, keeping quiet so the security team wouldn’t hear him, hoping I wouldn’t tell them where he was. Then there was a hell of a racket, and the blue box faded away. Which made me really cross, because it meant he’d got away with it again, another breach of regulations: unauthorised use of a T-Mat. I think the noise must have disturbed Zoe, because I thought I could hear her crying softly in her sleep. ’ think I can still hear it, after 13

all these years.

I’m not sorry I brought her to him. I know it was the right thing to do. I stopped the Doctor from stealing the temporal equations he wanted

for the Gallifrey Institute. And now that he's long gone, I've been working with Zoe, encouraging her to remember them for the UrtiCorp Project. I bet they're on the tip of her mind. Although, to be honest, she hasn't seemed all that bothered about the equations, she's had other interests. She'll come round to them, it's just a matter of time.

I was explaining all this only today. But Director Xafta says to me,

'Really, Sandra, I haven't got time for this yet again. It was more than a decade ago, can we move on? Perhaps you'd let me know how Miss Heriot's work is progressing, I haven't had a status report from your department for a month.'

'But Director,' I said, 'I sent you the funding allocations for new equipment yesterday.' She looks up from her desk like she's only just noticed me. The sun's silhouetting her against the picture window.

She says, 'I was thinking more of the status of your research than of your furniture requisitions. Your team's research, I mean. By end of business today, please.'

Back in my office, and I'm ready to tear a strip off my admin

assistant. But of course it's Wednesday, and he's not in, is he? Zoe's busy in the laboratory with Markalow and Ansum, so the whole of my research team are in today. She's still the brightest star in our little group, I assign her the important work. Well, I mean, Ansum is taking a year out from her degree. And Markalow is an offworlder, he was educated on Mars. Don't get me wrong, I'm all in favour of equal opportunities, but sometimes, like mother always used to say, you have to look after your own. Neither of them tease her about the mushroom dream the way the others used to. Mind you, Zoe says she doesn't have it any more. Nor the other dreams. Kids on that she can't remember ever having them.

Since mother passed on, I haven't wanted the responsibility of a big team. Besides, not many want to come this far out to XZ49. Which has proved to be a blessing in disguise, actually, because I can afford to be choosy. I only get the best available, despite nursing the remaining funds carefully. And I know I'm keeping Markalow and Ansum happy because none of the other Institutes bother trying to poach them these days, they know they'd be wasting their time. There were a few

approaches for Zoe last year, and she'd do well I suppose, but I know she wouldn't want it, so why distract her? I didn't even return their

calls.

Place is starting to look a bit tired. It could look lovely. And, trust 14

me to spot a bargain, I think I can lay my hands on some reclaimed furnishings, from XB38 in the next Sector now that it's being

obsoleted. Need to get the business case Spot On. I'll crack on with that now. You know me, no time like the present. When I'm faced with a difficult decision, I'm not afraid to grasp the nettle.

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The Splintered Gate

Justin Richards

I suppose it all began that summer, while I was on holiday; it was one of those small seaside towns that tries so desperately to be like Blackpool, and fails – thank God. I had been sitting on the pier, in a small tea room, watching what the weather man had been pleased to forecast as 'bright and sunny with a light breeze' bucketing down outside, and the bathers racing for the cover of the beach huts. Why they should worry so much about getting wet I never did discover, but the rain seemed to deter them from venturing back into the sea. It took me just five seconds to decide that I did not in all honesty know why I had come to this God-forsaken sun spot in the glowing heart of Dorset when I could have got quite as soaked in my own back garden for a fraction of the cost, and without having to eat ice cream.

As the rain let up for a moment, I pulled my jacket tight around me, put my head down and sacrificed dignity to speed in a futile attempt to make it back to the guest house before the weather redoubled its holiday mood. There was no chance, of course, and as soon as I had left the shelter of the cafe far enough behind to be of no real help, the heavens opened still, further and I abandoned my hopes and slowed to a walking pace, resigned to my sodden fate.

I remember that I glanced back in my wake for a moment and caught a glimpse through the tea room window, between the rivers running down the pane, of the two people at the table next to what had been mine They were sitting opposite each other – two women – unmoved since I had left them, though I do not in all honesty recall them being there. The younger woman reminded me of Miss Wright, but I put this down to the fleeting glance and the blurring rain. A brown paper parcel rested on the table, between them.

For a second I wished with all my soul to be in their position – inside in the dry and the warm – and as if sensing my feelings the young woman threw back her head and laughed. For a moment, I was sure it was Barbara and I almost ran back to find her and remark on the coincidence of two teachers from the same London school finding 16

themselves together in the long summer holiday.

But instead I leaned into the wind and battled on to my guest house.

Typically, as soon as I reached it – in fact my hand was on the front gate – the rain stopped and the skies cleared. The wind died down, and in a moment I was standing, with my disbelieving hand still on the gate, in brilliant sunshine.

I pulled my hand away, not in surprise but in anger at the elements, so predictable in their bloody-mindedness. The gate was an old

wooden one which had suffered from the forces of nature even more than I had. Its green paint was all but flaked away, and the wood was damp and brittle with age. As I pulled my hand away, meaning to dash it against my forehead in a gesture of theatrical dismay, I brought with it a long splinter embedded deep in my palm. It was such a maddening finale that I almost laughed.

Luckily the splinter was not fully lost and with a little effort I was able to pull it out with my undamaged hand, glad to have at least two nails on it of a reasonable length. Then, out of spite I think more than in order to dry out, I turned and headed back towards the pier, mentally shaking my sore fist at the unrepentant sun. That was the afternoon when I met the Fortune Teller.

She was sitting outside her booth beside a gift shop, and when I first saw her, through the rain-spattered window of the shop as I searched in vain for a suitable postcard for my mother, I mistook her for the older woman from the café. I think it was because she too was apparently sitting behind a wet sheet of glass. However, I soon realised my mistake, and when I left the shop (still card-less) I glanced at her to see who she was really.

However unobtrusive I had hoped to be, I found my eyes met by hers and for several seconds I was unable to break their hold. While this was disconcerting to say the least, did give me a chance, to get a good look at the woman She was about fifty, I suppose, and wore a

headscarf and large earrings which, along with her shawl, had the

effect – intentionally I assumed – of making her look like a gypsy.

Certainly the sign billed her as ‘Rosy Parks – Fortune Teller

Extraordinary’, and beside it there was a board of photographs. I assume they were of Rosy Parks staring into the spent cups of the second-rate celebrities who frequented the Pier Theatre, but I could not tell because the clear plastic sheet covering them had been turned by the rain into an ocean of distorting lenses – each drop throwing the picture beneath into an exaggerated caricature of itself, like the gypsy’s own face seen through her crystal ball.

Although I managed at last to tear my sight back from her and her booth, I felt embarrassed to have been caught staring, and I walked up
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to her. The woman looked up at me, and smiled slightly, her small black eyes again holding my attention, but less forcefully now

‘Want your palm read, I dare say,’ she said, her voice strong and smooth – which surprised me; I had expected it to be old and flawed, like a camp fire cracking at the tin kettle suspended above it. I think my surprise must have shown up in my face, for she smiled and held out her hands.

‘It won’t take a moment,’ she said quietly, taking my hand, still bunched into a fist, and slowly opening it out. Then I saw her surprise, and looked down at my palm.

I saw at once what had startled her. I had kept my hand tight shut, even in the shop, since pulling out the splinter. And after the splinter had come the blood, flowing freely from the hole I had unblocked for it. Thinned by the rain still clinging to my skin, the blood had tried to escape from my hand, only to be held in by my clenching it into a fist.

So it had followed the paths of least resistance, and there it had clotted, along the lines of my palm, so that each of the gypsy’s signposts was plainly marked by a strand of dried blood. She let go of my hand suddenly, as I had let go of the gate.

I opened my mouth to try to explain, and to apologise for having startled her, but my voice stuck in my throat, and before I could cough it free she had crossed herself and disappeared into the darkness of her booth. I frowned and walked on, troubled by the force of her reaction.

But when I washed my hand my memory of the incident spiralled

down the drain with the red water, leaving only the whiteness of the enamel and of the scar on my hand where the splinter had bitten. Until Barbara Wright's party that is.

It was nearing the end of the evening when Miss Wright finally

cornered me and forced me to be sociable. I had been congratulating myself – as one does – on having avoided all those boring people, like the headmaster, that you are forced to talk to at such events and who are so obviously bored by you. But now it seemed there was no escape.

'Ah, there you are,' Miss Wright said. 'I say, have you met

Rosemary? She's a palmist.' She propelled Rosemary in my direction, and with a hurried, 'Oh, look, there's Robert, must dash – back in a minute,' which failed to convince even me, was gone.

Rosemary and I looked at each other, and I introduced myself.

'Chesterton. I teach science at Coal Hill.'

Immediately she had reminded me of the Fortune Teller on the pier that day, for she had the same eyes and complexion as well as,

apparently, the same profession. 'Have you ever read Miss Wright's palm?' I asked her, thinking I must confess of the two women in the café.

She smiled. 'She rarely keeps it in one place long enough.' I laughed with her at that, as we watched our hostess gesticulating wildly at the unfortunate Robert. It did not occur to me until later that she had not answered my question. 'Have you ever had yours read?' Rosemary

asked me when the cabaret was done, and so I told her of the Gypsy and the splinter.

When I was finished she said nothing for several moments, then

reached out her hand. I instinctively raised mine, and she examined it briefly, running her index finger over the raised scar, now fading into the past, and frowned slightly.

‘Perhaps it was not just the blood,’ she said quietly. ‘There is something odd.’ She refused to be pressed further though, insisting that she must ‘check up on a few things first – just to make sure. Revision, if you like.’ I was not sure that I did, being – then – rather sceptical of the so-called ‘supernatural’ in all its many commercial forms, but I agreed, and she said she would call me. I never thought she would.

It was the following Tuesday that she rang. I remember because I had just locked the front door behind me when the phone started. I would have left it to ring, but when I turned I found a corner of my jacket was caught in the door, and by the time I had opened the door to release it and heard the increased sound of the bell, my conscience had caught up with me. I almost ran to answer, afraid that whoever was ringing would give up before I could get there.

‘I hope I’m not disturbing you,’ she said, and I said ‘of course not,’

transferring the receiver into my right hand in order to see how late I already was. It was a rushed conversation, and I agreed to meet her more to end the conversation quickly than because I really wanted to. I was so preoccupied wondering for one thing why she wanted to meet me at all, and for another why it had to be in a café, that I almost shut my jacket in the door again. All this just because she had glanced at my hand several days before, I thought wretchedly.

We met at four-thirty that wet Friday and both ordered tea.

‘Usually,’ she said, ‘I only need to read the palm. But sometimes I must look into the crystal too.’

‘And you’ve done that for me, have you?’

She smiled, and reaching into her bag brought out a brown paper parcel, about the same size as the teapot, but squared off. It was expertly tied in sensible string – the sort that does not break, but will allow enough purchase for the fingernails to unknot it. She placed the package on the table in front of us, and drained her cup. I asked her if she was going to unwrap it.

‘There is no need. The images form not in the glass itself, but in the 19

crystal of the mind. This is only the point of focus for my thoughts. Its presence is all I need.’ I waited as she stared intently at the parcel and the waitress filed her nails behind the counter. She stared so intently that I thought she must be trying to unravel not only my future but

the strands holding it in check.

The package sat between us on the Formica, a third silent person at our meeting in the warm dry café, shaking slightly whenever a train passed by.

'It is as I thought,' she said at last, looking up at me sadly. I smiled.

Her thoughts held no future of mine – of that I was sure. 'You may be going on a long journey.'

'With a goat's new compass?' I suggested. A.A. Milne has always held a delightful fascination for me, and her comment was scarcely original.

But she gave me a serious, old-fashioned look. 'Further than you have ever been before,' she said. 'Unless you are careful, you will face perils and experience things that no human should have to endure.'

'If you say so.' I was not impressed, but at least now she was

making an effort.

'One day,' she continued, 'you will sit in a café very similar to this one.' I straightened slightly, feeling the plastic hard against my back, and the tilt as I shifted my weight and the chair toppled on to its shorter back leg. The price was high, so the show had better be worth it.

'You will be with a woman. There will be only the two of you, and a waitress, and the sounds of the trains outside. Between you will stand a brown paper package. Whatever happens there, you must not take that package with you when you leave, or it will seal your fate. Your life will never be the same again.'

I shook my head, frankly in mute disbelief.

'You will talk with the woman and she will take the bag that you offer her. But the parcel must be left for her as well.' She looked into my eyes, and I was reminded of the Fortune Teller's deep black gypsy eyes. 'But I see that you cannot do that, can you? Because of who and what you are. And what must befall you. You will take the package, although it is not what you think it is...'

I actually threw back my head and laughed loudly at the absurdity of her words, catching sight of the rain streaming down the windows as I

did so. To think I had come here at all – that I called myself a science teacher, for pity's sake.

'I have told you what will happen.' She was unmoved by my

amusement. 'That is what the blood means, and the scar across your splintered life line, where it is shattered across time and space.'

'But you can't know,' I insisted. 'It's all a game really, isn't it – to 20

make money, that's all. You're as much of a charlatan as any other

"fortune teller"'

'I have spoken,' she said firmly but quietly, 'and you must pay. You will pay.'

I had her money in a bag, and almost without realising it, I had the bag in my hand. But I was resolved not to give it to her. I suppose I was holding it out to her as a gesture of defiance – to make the point that I was not willing to pay for this ridiculous conversation.

But she was quicker than I expected, and before I knew it, she had snatched the bag. She smiled contemptuously as the coins jangled inside. The combination of that sound and her self-satisfied grin galvanised me into movement.

I stood up, and grabbed. But again she was too quick, and my money was already disappearing into the folds of her sleeve. There was nothing else for it. I was determined she should not get away with this.

How many other people had she duped – would she dupe in the future?

She did not know any more than I did. She had forfeited her right to

'foretell' anyone's future – it was so obviously all false.

And now she had stolen my money. I stood there, shaking with

anger for a moment before I realised how I could compensate myself for the loss. It was a matter of principle – of instinct rather than decision. The crystal ball was the key; it safeguarded her own future.

I picked up the package and left the café.

The Man from DOCTO(R)

Andrew Collins

A blue fog of tobacco smoke hung heavily in the alcoholic air. The patchwork of many conversations formed a hubbub which blanketed the tinny jukebox. In the corner, three straight-backed men nursed their drinks and conversed amiably around a small table crammed with

empties.

'Y'see, apparently these potato-headed chaps have a little vent in the back of their necks where they plug themselves in to recharge...' Harry paused and looked into the expectant faces of his companions. Chumpy Withers and Buffy Worthington were grinning with indulgent

anticipation. Buffy's fat red face shone in the muted light of the pub.

'Back of their necks, eh?' Buffy gulped his beer, wiped foam from his moustache, and nudged Chumpy Withers, who chuckled.

'Tricky blighters, those potato-heads.' Chumpy's bug-eyes twinkled merrily, then flicked warily round the crowded bar, and swivelled back to regard Harry. 'Can't trust 'em,' he confided, winking.

Harry smiled and sipped his pint. He couldn't fault his friends for being sceptical; in fact, he admitted to himself, he actually preferred it that way. Being considered an eccentric storyteller gave him the freedom to easily entertain while adding whatever embellishments his whims dictated. And if this meant he sometimes came off as rather more heroic and quick-thinking than he had in fact been, well, there was no harm in that, so long as it facilitated the spinning of a good yarn. 'Anyway' he resumed, 'once we'd nobbled that fellow, the

invasion fleet was called off, leaving the Earth to be repopulated by the chaps from the space station.'

'The ones who'd been hibernating?'Buffy asked.

'Yes,' Harry said, 'they're the ones.' The dubious look which passed between his old chums was not lost on him: they didn't believe a word, of course.

The Fox and Chickens was a favourite haunt. It was unfussy and

slightly tatty, but it possessed, with its overstuffed leather upholstery and solid oak panelling, a comfortable, lived-in charm. The clientele

was a mix of entrenched regulars, happily oblivious tourists, and a fluctuating tide of London's trendy and clueless. It was the perfect setting for Harry to regale his amused friends with far-fetched tales of travelling the cosmos. They were tucked companionably in the corner booth, enjoying the crackling fire.

Chumpy was wiping his eyes with an absurd red-and-white spotted handkerchief. 'I don't know how you come up with it, old man,' he said, 'I really don't. I remember that tale about how you became transparent because of a flying sponge and some loud women. Had me quite disturbed.'

'Ah yes,' Harry coughed modestly, 'yes, that was a queer one He tailed off and stared thoughtfully into the dancing flames. 'I hope the repopulation went well,' he said after a moment. 'Never got to see it.

Got rather waylaid because our Time Ring thingy was diverted.'

'Hmm,' grunted Buffy knowingly, leaning forward in his chair.

'Potato-heads, was it?' To his left, Chumpy spluttered into his pint.

'No, not that time.' Firelight danced in Harry's eyes. 'Not that time.'

He looked up in time to see Buffy drain his glass. Harry launched himself to his feet. 'My round, I think.'

Turning up the collar of his trench coat against the harsh night, Harry stepped out into the windy streets. Despite the lateness of the hour, throngs of diehards still bustled along the pavements, dodging

gleaming black taxis as they swished by. Leaves and litter skittered along the gutters. Harry smelled rain and fried food.

It had been a good evening, but he was looking forward to hitting the sack. He stepped past a laughing young punk couple – all safety-pins and tufted rainbow hair – and avoided something nasty on the

pavement. As he turned into a quieter silver-lit square, something with great momentum collided with his chest and shrieked, leaving him

temporarily winded.

‘Oof!’ Harry said. ‘I say, I’m most awfully sorry. Are you all right?’

He peered in concern at the dishevelled form before him.

The young lady was clearly in some distress. Her breathing was

rapid, and tear-tracks of mascara streaked her cheeks. Her expression was glassy and panicked as she dumbly stared at him for a second out of wide long-lashed brown eyes. Then, blinking, she visibly gathered her wits and broke into a grin. ‘Say that again,’ she said.

‘Er. Gosh, all right. Sorry, feeling a bit thick-headed at the moment.

Erm, I say, I’m most awfully sorry. Are you... what?’

She was giggling now, and Harry found himself joining in. ‘You’re very proper.’ she told him solemnly, then took a deep shaky breath, and looked searchingly over her shoulder.

Harry took the moment to observe her more fully. She looked to be in her mid-twenties. Curly chestnut hair framed a pale heart-shaped face and cascaded over her shoulders. There were splashes of mud on her shoes and calves. She stood a head shorter than him, and her slim athletic figure did all the right things in all the right places. She was, he decided, jolly pretty. She was also, he realised, coatless, shivering and out of breath: he noted how her chest was heaving.

His eyes returned to her face. She was already watching him, her expression quizzical. Harry blushed. ‘I hope I didn’t hurt you, ’ she said. ‘I was panicking. My name’s Lettice,’ she added, her voice like warm chocolate, ‘Lettice Butts. ’

‘Harry Sullivan,’ he said, gallantly struggling out of his coat. ‘Here.

You look like you need this.’ Thanking him and smiling slightly, she let him drape the coat about her shoulders. ‘So what the devil’s the matter? Something obviously gave you a terrible fright.’

‘I’m in trouble, Harry.’ She fixed him with a steady gaze. ‘I was being followed. There are men looking for me.’

‘I see.’ Harry ran a hand through his dark curls and glanced around.

‘Well, I don’t see anyone coming after you right now, but I’m not going to abandon a damsel in distress. Look, I tell you what... Let’s get you home, eh?’ He offered her his arm. ‘I’d be happy to escort you, make sure you get back safely.’

Lettice looked relieved. ‘That would be wonderful.’

Moments later they rounded a corner on to a busy street. The traffic lights were turning red, and impatient engines revved as pedestrians ambled across the road. A black limo purred to a halt. Suddenly, Lettice froze. Harry found he had taken several steps without her, and turned to go back. The girl looked stricken. As he approached her, she grabbed his hand and pulled him into the nearest shop doorway. She stood close to him.

‘Kiss me, Harry,’ she said.

‘I beg your pardon?’ Her eyes were bright. He could feel her body pressed against his. ‘I say, steady on...’

She kissed him passionately. Her lips were warm and soft, and she tasted of cherries.

‘Don’t you think we should get to know each other before...’ Harry’s protests were smothered by her strong, urgent kisses. One hand clawed at the back of his neck, pulling his face to hers, the other pressed into the small of his back. This time, the embrace lasted. The kisses lingered. When she broke away, Harry was left gawping.

Lettice, meanwhile, was poking her head out of the shop doorway and cautiously glancing left and right as the traffic rolled past. She turned to him, smiled tightly, and tugged at his elbow. ‘Come on,’ she 24

said, ‘we’re nearly there.’

Inside the limo, bloodshot yellow eyes narrowed. ‘Well?’

‘It was her, boss.’

‘Now isn’t that interesting.’ Shadows from passing street lamps chased each other across the man’s face as he reclined in the plush seat.

The engine hummed quietly. ‘And now she has a... *friend* with her. I’m curious about that.’

‘Want me to kill him, boss?’ The rumbling voice was like the

opening of an ancient crypt.

‘No, no. That won’t be necessary just yet, although perhaps a little...

chat is in order.’

‘Yes, boss.’

‘We’re close, Cruncher, very close.’ A dry tongue licked thin lips,

‘Soon, very soon, the Egg will be ours!’ His abrupt laugh was cruel and disturbingly enthusiastic.

The room was in darkness. A clock ticked. Beyond the front door, two sets of footsteps grew louder as they ascended the stairs. The top step creaked twice. A key scratched in the lock, and the heavy door swung open on protesting hinges. The light snapped on.

‘Harry, I can’t thank you enough. You may very well have saved my life.’ Lettice strode in, hanging up her keys and throwing the trench coat on the sofa.

Timidly following he; Harry modestly demurred: Really old thing, it was nothing. Any decent chap worth his salt would’ve done the same.

Well. Safely home.

Against his better judgement, Harry had allowed himself to be

prevailed upon to come up to the flat. The girl had been extremely persuasive. And she did have a point, he supposed: after all, it certainly was within the realms of feasibility that someone could indeed be lurking on the stairs, intent on her undoing. He still felt, however, that his intrusion was improper.

The place was modestly, even sparsely, furnished. There was an old wooden table with two mismatching chairs, a threadbare sofa, a stained coffee table. Beneath the grubby window, a wobbly-looking bookcase held a few well-thumbed paperbacks. There was a small dingy kitchen to the side, and another door, presumably leading to the bed- and bathrooms. Lettice was rummaging in the drawer of a dilapidated desk.

When she turned, she was holding a large, sealed, well-stuffed manila envelope. Her attitude was all business, ‘I need you to deliver this for me. I was going to do it myself, but it’s no longer safe for me to be

seen – I'm too identifiable to them now.'

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'I say, what exactly is this all about? What are you mixed up in?'

'It would take too long to explain.'

Harry was beginning to feel distinctly uncomfortable, 'Look here, I don't want to get into anything dodgy...'

She put her finger to Harry's lips, 'Please Harry. Please trust me.

Just do this for me – there may not be much time. I trust you, Harry.

You're a good, honest man – you have integrity, I saw that

immediately. Please do this one thing for me. You can't possibly know how important this is. Will you deliver it?'

Dumbly, he nodded.

'Oh, thank you!' She quickly scratched an address on the top sheet of the phone pad and tore it off. 'Thank you, Harry. Now go. Quickly!'

She thrust both envelope and address into his hands, kissed him lightly on the cheek, and bustled him out of the door.

Head bent into the wind, Harry walked along with the envelope

clutched to his chest. The street was deserted. He was considering his options, debating with himself whether to complete the task, or just open the envelope and jolly well find out what was what. He was half convinced the girl was barmy.

Only when it started to rain did Harry realise he'd left his coat at the flat. Great. So now he had another dilemma: go back or complete his –

apparently vital – mission. And there was never a taxi around when you needed one. Muttering curses, he huddled deeper into his blazer.

So preoccupied was he by his confusion and discomfort that he failed to notice the black limo as it silently approached from behind, and slowed to a stop. The doors sprang open and menacing figures poured out, quickly surrounding him. They were armed and there was

something odd about the way they moved, but Harry barely had time

to take it all in before he was viciously pistol-whipped from behind.

He sank into oblivion as they bundled him into the car.

Lettice was folding clothes into a small suitcase, and speaking into it.

An aerial projected from the corner of the open lid, and the lid itself contained dials, buttons and switches which distinguished it as a highly sophisticated two-way radio transmitter.

'... So I'm leaving right away.' she concluded.

A thin voice crackled from the small inset speaker. 'That's probably for the best, Agent Butts. Take care, won't you.'

'Of course...' A noise beyond the door distracted her. It was the creaking of the top step. 'I'll see you at the rendezvous,' she said briskly, and clicked off the set, closing the lid. Suddenly alert, she moved catlike across the room. As she went, she noticed for the first

time Harry's coat still lying on the sofa.

There was a polite knock at the door.

Relief flooded over her. Grinning and exhaling, Lettice stepped to the sofa and grabbed the coat. 'Did someone forget something?' she called, reaching for the doorknob.

The front door exploded off its hinges, and armed figures burst into the room.

Lettice screamed.

'Unh...'

Consciousness was returning slowly. Groaning, Harry lifted his

aching head from his chest and opened his eyes. His first impression was of searing light, and he quickly squeezed them shut again. Was it day already? How long had he been out? After a moment he tentatively opened them again, one at a time, and squinted at his surroundings. He was in a large hangar-like space, dusty from disuse. Though mostly empty, a few rotting crates were dotted around. Shafts of light sliced the air from holes in the ceiling. An abandoned warehouse.

He was sitting in a hard chair, and he discovered that his arms were tied behind him. He tried to move his legs and found they too were secured. Crikey, what kind of a fix had he got himself into now?

Sinister shapes were watching him. One of them – a slight man with receding grey hair – stepped into the light, heels echoing. A white scar bisected one eyebrow and ran down his right cheek. ‘Welcome back to the land of the living,’ he said. ’How long you remain in it is, of course, up to you.’ The man’s face didn’t quite seem to fit right. Tautly stretched in some places, sagging in others, it was as if strange contours bulged just beneath the surface of his skin ‘I am Abel Crumpton, and you, according to the identification in your wallet, are Harry Sullivan.’ He leant in closer, emitting oily breath. ‘I’m...

intrigued to know more.’

‘Such as?’

‘Where is the Egg?’

Harry just looked at him blankly. After a moment he blinked.

‘Oh dear. Mr Cruncher? If you please.’ The huge bearded figure had been hovering at Crumpton’s shoulder. Now he stepped forward, raised his arm, and struck Harry viciously. Lights exploded behind Harry’s eyes, and he tasted blood.

‘There’s no need for that!’

‘It’s really very simple, Mr Sullivan,’ Crompton hissed. ‘Tell us the whereabouts of the Egg, and you may just live to see another dawn.’

‘Look here old chap, I’d love to help, but the truth is that I haven’t the foggiest what you’re on about.’

‘Mr Cruncher?’ Another blow. Harry dazedly felt a trickle of blood making its way down his left temple and into his sideburn. He

struggled against his bonds, but they held tight. He could have wept in powerless frustration.

‘That envelope –’ Crumpton’s voice was brittle – ‘contained coded documents. We haven’t yet deciphered them but I know they can lead us to the Egg.’ He fixed Harry with a pitiless gaze. ’It’s hard to believe

you are as... ignorant as you make out. I want that Egg, Mr Sullivan. I want it very much.'

Harry stared defiantly. 'Well jolly good luck to you. I suppose you want your toast cut into little soldiers too, but I can't help with that either. I'm a bit tied up.'

Crumpton's beady yellow eyes glittered, 'Do not trifle with me, Mr Sullivan. I am not a man to mock. Do you have any conception of the trouble you're in? Do you even realise what you've got yourself into?

Do you? ' So saying, he lifted his hand to a point below his jaw line, and with an upward flourish, ripped his face off. The leering lizard features that were revealed beneath were set into a crazed expression of rage. The green scales were dry and flaky, and wide nostrils flared on a spitefully wrinkled snout. Jagged rows of teeth gnashed in the sneering mouth. Harry cringed in shock.

'You will tell me what I want to know – one way or another.' The creature turned away. 'Mr Cruncher – do your worst.' His narrow head twisted back to Harry. 'Mr Cruncher takes pride in his work,' he said.

'He's an artist.' And he left.

The huge man loomed over Harry, and was joined by three more

figures from the shadows. Each had the merciless head of a lizard and moved in quick, darting gestures. Hissing, they closed in on his helpless form.

It was later. Harry was nursing his injuries, curled on the floor of a small bare storeroom, which was serving as a makeshift cell. Light fell from a high window. The sadistic brutes had beaten him, but stopped short of inflicting permanent harm. He wondered what they were

saving him for.

The floor began to vibrate.

At first it was very slight, but it rapidly increased in intensity. Dust rose and billowed in growing profusion. He coughed, pulled himself to his knees, and looked round in bewilderment. What fiendish scheme had those filthy swine concocted for him this time?

A crack appeared in the floor, and suddenly there was a small

fountain of spewing dust and concrete chunks. This was accompanied by a grinding, crunching noise which grew rapidly in volume and 28

pitch. Harry backed away to the wall, wiping his streaming eyes. Dirt flew as something started to poke through the floor, motors clanking and screeching. Very soon there was a large hole surrounded by rubble, and from it projected some kind of mechanical mole-machine. Its nose was rotating and screwlike, threaded with spiral grooves and tapered to a point.

A hatch clanged open on the top, and a thick-set, ginger-haired man poked his head out, 'What are you waiting for? Get in!' he urged.

Harry did as he was told.

The man's name was Radcliff. He informed the bruised Harry that he had located him because Lettice had slipped a homing beacon into his pocket – presumably while they were kissing. When Harry had turned out his pockets and found nothing which seemed unusual, Radcliff lifted a pen from the pile and unscrewed it, revealing the wiring inside.

'Appearances can be deceptive,' he said.

The interior of the Mole was pokey and cramped, and the ride was decidedly bumpy. Radcliff spent much of their journey silently

absorbed in piloting the craft, but when Harry asked him about the Egg, his response was strident.

'The Egg? That's what it's all about, Harry; the beginning – or the end of everything. He took a deep breath, eyed Harry appraisingly, then seemed to come to a decision.

'We're aliens, from the planet Zantor, here on a secret mission. The Garvaks tried to obliterate our world: their intention is complete genocide. Their leader's a particularly psychotic xenophobe named Abel Crumpton.'

'Oh, we've met.' Harry grimaced. 'Garvaks, eh?'

'Brutal totalitarian lizards. Crumpton wanted our world; when we fought back he decided the only solution was total annihilation.' He paused broodingly. 'He did it, too. Zantor is dead.' He wrenched the steering column, and gears grated in protest. Harry buckled his seatbelt. Radcliff continued. 'A few of us survive, out in the cosmos.

We cling to one desperate hope. The Egg of Abundance is a seeding device – my race's only chance of survival. It contains the genetic template of all life on Zantor. Naturally, Crumpton wants it destroyed.

Earth was a staging post, a regional base of operations, from which we were to travel on and seed a *new* world. But the Garvaks caught up with us here and for years now, the Egg has been the object of intrigue and deception, passing from one side to the other in a deadly game of cat and mouse.'

Harry's face was intent. He was nodding slowly. 'Can I go home

now, please?' he asked after a beat.

29

Radcliff s voice was quiet when he spoke again, 'Lettice is missing.'

Harry was caught off guard. 'What did you say?'

The ride was becoming smoother as the Mole entered established

tunnels.

'She's my partner. We were meant to rendezvous after you delivered the documents, but she never showed up... And you delivered the documents to Crumpton, along with my address.'

'That's a bit rich.' Harry's cheeks coloured beneath the grime,

'Look, I didn't ask to be involved. And it was hardly my fault.'

'Of course not,' Radcliff stated, 'But it does mean the game's tilted in their favour.'

Harry's shoulders stiffened with determination, 'Well, we have to find her. And stop Crumpton.'

Radcliff grunted, 'I hoped you'd say that.' The Mole gave a

shuddering lurch and was still. He set the handbrake, 'We're here.'

'Where?' Harry asked. 'Where are we?' The hatch clanged open.

They emerged into a gleaming white and chrome chamber packed

with vehicles of all descriptions. Hovercraft, speedboats and

streamlined sports cars shared berths with an array of odd-looking capsules and caterpillar-tracked ornithopters. Among the aisles, white-coated technicians busily bustled.

As they clambered out of the Mole, a giant crane arm fastened about the craft and hoisted it into a metal holding cradle. Clamps hissed down to hold it in place.

Radcliff was striding down an aisle between passenger gyroscopes and clockwork submersibles.

'Welcome to DOCTO(R), Harry,' he said over his shoulder.

'Doctor?'

'Department of Overt and Covert Tactical Operations (Regional).

Our secret/ base, located deep beneath Guildford. He slid a plastic card through a reader on the wall, and the door slid open. 'A picturesque little market town in Surrey,' he added, and they stepped into a long white corridor.

As they passed a mirror, Harry looked mournfully at his grimy,

battered reflection. 'This blazer's ruined,' he lamented. Radcliff squeezed his shoulder sympathetically, and Harry winced.

Patched up in the medical bay, Harry had bathed, slept, eaten, and was beginning to feel vaguely human again. Now, dressed in a cream suit, with a dark burgundy shirt and matching tie, he had joined Radcliff to be briefed by Auntie Em.

They entered the outer office where a leggy blonde was typing.

Radcliff introduced Juniper Berry, who smiled sexily. Harry nearly 30

walked into the doorframe, 'The name's Sullivan,' he said, extending an enthusiastic hand, 'Harry Sullivan. *Doctor* Harry Sullivan as a matter of fact...' Radcliff pulled him away.

Auntie's office was formal and impersonal. 'Auntie' Emily Dunkirk herself proved to be a stout little woman with prominent eyes. She had a broad-boned, pleasant face beneath a dark mop of unruly curls. A massive black cat sprawled on her lap; she was scratching it under the chin. Her 'manner was peremptory. 'Mister Sullivan, Agent Butts trusted you, so we must too. We're assigning you to DOCTO(R). We

have a situation. We intercepted a Garvak transmission regarding the Egg –'

'Was it scrambled?' Harry quipped. Radcliff kicked his ankle.

She didn't miss a beat. 'It was, but we broke the code. Crumpton doesn't mean to destroy the Egg; he intends to subvert it, pervert its purpose.'

Radcliff frowned. 'How so?'

'Yes, what kind of plot is he hatching?' Harry asked earnestly.

'The Egg can seed worlds – its power is immense. Which means its potential for misuse is similarly immense. Our operatives have

indicated Crumpton has been assembling a machine which will

overwrite the Egg's DNA matrix, creating a new encoded lattice

patterned on a Garvak template. He can then unleash this corrupted Egg, instantly restructuring every life form on this world.' She stroked the cat. 'Even Mr Catopotamous here. Crumpton intends to reinvent Earth in his image.'

Harry's face was a picture of bemusement, quickly replaced by a steely resolve, 'He's got to be stopped.'

'Furthermore, he has the key.'

'What do you mean?'

'The Egg requires a specific Zantoran mind-print to activate it. And he has it: Lettice, last child of Zantor? She held up a photograph,

'Here's a picture so you'll recognise it when you see it.'

'Looks just like a chicken egg,' Harry said, nonplussed.

'Appearances can be deceptive. Its last known location was a bank vault in Zurich. We're no longer sure where it is. Find Crompton. Find the Egg. Stop him.'

Harry and Radcliff nodded grimly.

'As soon as you get a positive fix, I want you to call for a Zantoran spaceship and arrange a pick-up. It's imperative we get it off-world as

soon as possible. The transmitter will be built into your attaché cases.

Pick up standard kit from the quartermaster.' Auntie paused, 'Finally, we have watches for you.' She gestured, and Ms Berry handed them over.

31

'And what do they do?' Harry asked eagerly. 'Poison darts? Laser cutter? Remote control detonator?'

Auntie looked at him solemnly. 'They tell the time. Synchronise them please.'

'Ah. Right. I'm with you.' Stepping out of the office, under the amber glower of Mr Catopotamous, Harry smiled ruefully as he

reflected on his situation. Off to save the world again. Just like the old days.

The Swiss banker they met was courteous but wary. The Egg had been released to a large bearded gentleman whose papers were in order.

Beyond that, all he could tell them was that the man represented a consortium apparently based somewhere in the Americas – or possibly Europe...

...Amid the fumes of Mexico City, a toothless one-eyed beggar directed them to the railway station, slipping them a key. The matching locker contained tickets for a private flight to Brazil...

...Harry sweated in his tuxedo as they muttered with their contact around a baccarat table in Rio. A scantily clad, coffee-skinned waitress sidled up, and Harry placed his order: 'Vodka martini.'

'Shaken?'

'No, I'm fine, just a little tired.'

They were too late. The Egg had moved East...

...Disembarking a junk in Shanghai, their associate informed them that the known Garvak cell operating in the city had suddenly dispersed just days before. All its members had separately bought flights to Brussels.

Radcliff became grave at the news. 'Crumpton's closing down his operation, Harry. That's a bad sign – it means the Egg is certainly in his possession.'

And, as they tracked the Garvak evil round the globe, mounting evidence confirmed the emerging picture. All roads were leading to Belgium.

Two silent black-clad figures dropped through a skylight, disengaged their lines, and slipped into the corridor. Crumpton's lair was an echoing warren of slatted grilles, metal gantries and high walkways.

They had jumped from a low-flying biplane over the Alps and hidden their parachutes and packs in the undergrowth, attaché cases humming.

Using their binoculars' thermal imaging, they had located the secret Garvak base, buried deep in the mountainside. Now they stealthily crept onward.

Hearing footsteps, they soundlessly darted beneath a stairwell, 32

holding their breath. Two uniformed figures scuttled past. Harry's stomach growled and he reddened with embarrassment. 'Sorry,' he whispered awkwardly, 'I missed breakfast.'

Before long, Radcliff grabbed Harry's arm and pointed. The door ahead was of toughened glass, and behind it, stretched limply on a bed, was Lettice. Harry's heart leapt. Radcliff picked the lock and they hurried inside.

With Radcliff keeping an eye on the corridor, Harry worked to

revive Lettice. 'Come on, old girl,' he encouraged, slapping her cheek gently, and rubbing her wrists. She murmured and stirred. One eye opened, and she smiled dully up at him. Taking an arm each, they supported her out of the cell.

Although drained, Lettice was physically unharmed. 'Crumpton's

only interested in my mind,' she told them. 'He's got some kind of ceremony planned. He intends for me to unlock the Egg.'

'Do you know where it's kept?' Radcliff asked.

She nodded. 'Follow me.'

Harry's stomach rumbled again as they passed the canteen. He

stopped. 'Hold on,' he said, 'so sorry – won't be a tick. Before they could protest, he dashed in.

The air buzzed with anticipation. Banners of Crumpton's face adorned the walls.

An enormous cylindrical machine dominated the hall, rotating

slowly and throbbing with restrained power. At its narrowed base, surrounded by delicate instruments, sat an empty eggcup.

From the side of the stage, Abel Crompton gazed deliriously at the expectant crowd. He wore an impeccable suit and his human mask, and wires trailed from his neck and wrists, connecting him to the machine.

'Mr Cruncher?' He savoured the words. 'Bring me the Egg.'

Soon, the world would be his... all his! Overcome, he burst into peals of laughter.

The Egg chamber was just off the main hall Harry, Lettice and Radcliff were right outside when they heard the rumbling voice behind them.

'Well, what have we here?'

Crompton mounted the stage, trailing wires, and took his place at the podium. The spontaneous ovation was huge, and he momentarily

bathed in its glow. Then, gesturing for quiet, he addressed the gathered ranks of his lizard minions. 'My people,' he said, 'for years we have worked to acquire the Egg and complete our conquest. Hiding among...

humans.' He spat out the word. 'Now the tide will turn. I give you...

the Genetic Manipulator!'

Cruncher, cradling the Egg, fitted it into the eggcup. The titanic machine lit up like the Vegas strip. The crowd burst into thunderous applause. Lettice, strapped to a table, electrodes attached to her temples, looked on in fright. Harry and Radcliff, restrained by guards, watched helplessly.

Crompton preened, 'Today, we celebrate a double victory: the final end of Zantor, and the start of a new Garvak Empire – here on Earth! A new world is about to be born – a world free from the contamination of the unlike. When we wipe the Egg's DNA matrix and

replace it with my own, a new order of racial purity commences. This world becomes like us! So begins my... *apotheosis*.' He ripped off his human face in triumph, and the assembled crowd followed suit. The mob was

transformed into a slavering reptilian mass as the chant went up:

'Crompton ! Crompton! Crumpton!'

Lowering a golden circlet on to his head, Crumpton gestured

grandly. A switch was thrown. The Manipulator throbbed with power.

Lettice shrieked. As Abel Crompton barked with insane delight, and power vibrated in the air, the roaring of the crowd reached a crescendo.

The Egg exploded.

Yolk, white, and bits of shell splattered the floor for a ten-foot radius and slowly began to cook. There was a surprised pause. Someone, somewhere said, 'Uh-oh'. All eyes gradually turned towards

Crumpton. Abel Crompton was standing at his podium, staring in

disbelief. He went at first very pale, then his green skin flushed nearly black as an apoplectic rage built within him. 'Who has done this?' he spluttered. Then he turned to Harry, still held by two guards.

' *Sullivan!* ' he gurgled hoarsely.

Harry nodded, 'Mr Cruncher thought he found us on the way in to the Egg chamber. Actually, we were on our way out.' There was a series of fizzles and pops from various points on the machine, followed by a succession of muted explosions. Sparks showered down. A spout of steam hissed as a valve blew. He continued blithely, 'You know how it is when you the wrong parts.'

Crumpton's headset suddenly arced with electricity and he

screeched. Clutching his head, he stared at the igniting machine in dumb incomprehension. Warning klaxons sounded harshly.

'It's created a feedback loop,' Radcliff yelled. 'Instead of focusing the Garvak gene pattern and broadcasting it outward, it's bouncing back and imprinting the gene pattern from the focus point on to the Garvaks!'

Crumpton gaped. ‘But the focus point was...’

‘A hen’s egg.’ Harry confirmed. ‘Picked it up in the canteen.

Appearances can be deceptive.’

34

A shaft of brilliant light lanced out from the heart of the machine and pierced Crumpton’s torso. Everywhere in the room, panicked lizards were being impaled on blinding beams of light, their outlines melting and changing. Harry took advantage of the chaos to run to the table and free a grateful Lettice.

Crumpton yelped as his snout extended, changing even as they

watched into a hard little beak. He also seemed to be diminishing, shrinking, as spiky feathers exploded through his scales. In seconds the metamorphosis was complete, and he had transformed into an

astonished brown rooster.

‘I always said you were a bad egg, Crumpton,’ Harry remarked.

All around them, stunned Garvaks were changing into beady-eyed

bundles of feathery clucking fury. The Manipulator, meanwhile, was pitting fire and rumbling dangerously. Radcliff grabbed Harry and Lettice. As they sprinted for the exit, the fowl that had been Mr Cruncher pecked Harry’s foot. ‘Oh yes?’ Harry challenged. ‘Come on then!’ The bird strutted away and Harry scoffed. ‘ Too chicken, eh?’

They burst out of the main entrance accompanied by a flurry of

squawking, flapping poultry. Behind them, the Garvak lair erupted in prodigious sheets of flame.

The smell of roast chicken was heavy in the Alpine air. Harry

coughed, sat, and tried to get his breath back. After a moment, he looked up. The squat silver shape of a Zantoran spaceship was already hovering above the treetops, glinting in the sunlight. Radcliff waved, and a ramp extended.

‘Harry, you’re brilliant!’ Lettice puffed, ‘But where’s the real Egg?’

‘Right here,’ Harry said, patting his jacket pocket. There was a

crunching sound and a stain began to spread, ‘Oops, no, that was a spare. Ah! Here we are.’ He gently lifted the Egg of Abundance from his other pocket. It was heavy and glowed with an inner light, ‘So this’ll save your people, eh?’ Lettice nodded. ‘Hard to believe something so inoffensive and fragile can contain such fantastic potential,’ he marvelled.

Lettice gave him a funny look, ‘Oh Harry,’ she put her arms round his neck, looked into his eyes, and sighed. ‘I couldn’t have put it better myself.’ Kissing him lightly on the end of his nose, she took the Egg reverently, turned, and walked up the ramp into the ship. In the doorway, she turned to look at him once more. ‘Take care, Harry.

Thanks for everything!’ And she was gone Radcliff shook his hand and followed.

* * *

35

‘And so the girl gets on this blooming great spaceship with the seeding device to save an entire alien civilisation, and promptly leaves the planet. Leaving me to get back from the Belgian Alps without my passport.’ Harry sat back and swirled his brandy. ‘Fortunately, I know a chap at the Embassy...’

Downing their pints, Chumpy Withers and Buffy Worthington were

chortling in gleeful disbelief. Buffy gave him a shrewd look. ‘Does Belgium actually have Alps, old man?’ he asked.

Harry looked up sharply, then cleared his throat, ‘My round, I think,’

he said, and headed for the bar.

36

Apocrypha Bipedium

Ian Potter

A Suggestive Correlation of The Cressida Manuscripts with other Anomalous Texts of the Pre-Animarian Era as proposed for Collective Consideration by Historiographic Speculator Anctloddoton.

In my selection and placement of the following extracts from the literature of the extinct worlds, I have attempted to draw suggestive parallels between some of the Problem Texts of the humanoid cultures.

Obviously, the records of those times are now so fragmentary that any conclusions we draw from the surviving evidence must remain

speculative. We cannot know what evidence we are missing, thus the linking of events posited by the presentation of these documents must remain a tentative hypothesis at best.

HS A

From *The Primary Cressida Document – Suppressed Texts of the*

***Vatican Library, A Mysteria Press Original,* 2973 CE.**

The past is another country, the Doctor used to say. By which I suppose he meant it's a nice place to visit but you wouldn't want to live there, and you can have real problems with customs when you arrive.

I grew up in the future myself, which makes living in the past tricky at times. Liverpool *was* a great place to grow up if you were into the past though. It was full of it; the Campus Manor theme park, the castle, the Beatles Memorial Theatre, The Saint Francis of Fazakerley

Museum, the Carl Jung Dream Tour, Post-Industrial Land and all those cathedrals, you were tripping over history everywhere. Mummy's

parents came from there too, so it was practically like we knew real-life olden days people.

It was much better than Liddell Towers where we lived in New

London – most of the history near there seemed to be about some silly girl who'd let a professor of sums take photos of her and fell down a rabbit hole, or about those awful Daleks wiping out Southern England

with mines and things. Much duller and hardly any variety in the rides at all.

Here in the actual olden days there's not much past anywhere, just loads of future, and the rides are even less fun, all carts and donkeys

and hardly any roads. We're moving again, you see, dear diary. Even though the conquering Greeks don't really seem to want to colonise any of Asia Minor themselves they don't seem to want anyTrojans settling back down anywhere round here either. They've occupied what's left of the city, I suspect mainly so Menelaus can find all the expensive bits of Helen's jewellery she seems to have mislaid, and seem keen we don't hang about too nearby. Mymiddon Hoplites

apologetically move us on now and again, clearly wondering when they can decently be allowed back home to start fighting amongst themselves again, and so we pack up and move. Some of their chaps are still feeling rather tetchy for no good reason apparently. Troilus says there's a silly rumour going around that some terrible woman, probably a goddess, went around whipping up aggression amongst the Greeks a few years ago by magic, leaving marks on their necks that mean they can't calm down!

It doesn't make any sense to me. I think I might just be getting the cleaned up version of a soldier's tale actually. I think that happens with me a lot. People treat me like a silly little girl sometimes, which isn't really fair when I come from the future and know all sorts of things they don't. I'm an adult now, even if not being born yet does make me about minus four thousand officially.

I don't think Agamemnon's Greeks really know what to do now to

be honest, and after a decade's anticipation I don't think the trade routes or the princess they were sacking Troy to get are quite as good as they were hoping. I think they're just hanging around stopping us settling down and looking for lost costume jewellery until they can think of something better to do. Some of the Ithacans are moaning it'll be another decade before any of them get home at this rate. Bless them.

Running out of room, dear diary. Will write more when I have some new goats' hides.

From *Not Necessarily the Way I Do It! The True Confessions of a Ka Faraq Gatri not just written for the money when trapped on a primitive planet and needing cash to buy parts by* 'Snail', *Boxwood Books,* 300 AGB.

Of course the hairy kangaroo had been at the mind rubbers and didn't

even realise the sword was there! How we laughed. Terrible name-dropper, Zodin, but worth her weight in soufflé all the same.

38

Naturally enough, mention of name-dropping reminds me of another anecdote, this one relating to dear old Bill Shakespeare, one of the finest writers and most atrocious spellers of any age. I've met him several times now and hope to again if I ever get off this pre-warp-engineering dustball. The last time was during that sticky business with poor Kitty Marlowe and those Psionovores from Neddy Kelley's old scrying glass that I related in Chapter 9, but perhaps our most awkward misadventure together was the time I introduced him to some of his own characters, who included, as it happened, a dear, dear friend of mine.

From *The Dairy of an Edwardian Adventuress* by Charlotte Elspeth Bollard, Library of Kar-Charrat. The work, having suffered some worm damage in the Great 2107 AD Cock Up, is presented here in the Elgin decorruption.

Travelling with Wilf and the Doctor was a curious experienced already felt somewhat out of sorts with time, having discovered my very existence was making history split in two, but sharing a home with a boy from the 16th Century and a man who seemed to come from

nowhere so much as his own imagination, merely heightened my

feeling that I no longer belonged to any era.

We three fellow time travellers had so very little in common beyond having all read the plays the boy had not yet written that the small talk had been small indeed, and, after a few days of the Doctor failing to get Wilf home, the atmosphere had become a little tense.

Wilf, it further transpired, had difficulty reading anything written in more modern Anglish than his own, which meant there had been little of a literary nature to distract him during his sojourn with us once he had read and re-read the Doctor's picture books about Frinchs,

Sneetches, Ooblecks and Cats in Hams.

Thankfully, towards the end of Wilf's stay with us the Doctor had discovered a futuristic version of Lido called Peter Pan Pop-O-Matic Frustration that we could enjoy playing together and those last long hibiscus-scented afternoons in his music room passed pleasantly

enough, without young Wilf having to constantly relate the escapades of besocked foxes to us.

The Doctor always won our games, usually coming from behind

implausibly late in the day, and nearly always using some devious subterfuge to gain victory. Indeed, it was observing the childlike joy on the Doctor's face at his underhand triumphs on the Peter Pan Pop-OMatic Frustration board that I first realised just how much of Peter there was in his nature. Naturally, we loved him enough to pretend not 39

to notice his cheating (I sometimes think the whole universe did) and at times towards the end we three had so much fun that I almost forgot I was a paradox, unpicking creation like Penelope at her tapestry in the heroic age we had just left.

From *The Pseudo-Shackspur – works attributed to William*

***Shakespeare* collated by Heinrich Von Berlitz and Leopold Kettlecamp, *Ampersand and Ampersand,* 85 AH.**

This passage from *The Noble Troyan Woman of Troy* – fragmentary foul papers of a naive work once attributed to the very young

Shackspur, is worth quoting in full.

Act 2, Scene 1. A room within the box. Enter Mistress Charley, Doctor Shallow and Young Will.

Doct. Here at last! Our journey finally through.

In fifteen hundred and seventy two.

Young Will, regard the ceiling viewing dome –

Stratford on Avon, the Hathaway home.

Will. But sir, on those bare hills, no swarths do roll.

And no houses nestle 'twixt those craggy knolls –

The sun burns with a fierce un-English light

And that beach there is not a Warwick sight!

That's not Stratford displayed above us

Char. – Lest the Avon's turn'd to sea, 'Od love us!

Many scholars have disputed the authenticity of this piece of alleged Shackspurian juvenilia, pointing out, fairly, that it does appear to be the only one of his extant works that the Bard biroed in a twentieth-century school jotter otherwise festooned in swirly ink blots and doodled hexagons. However, if Shackspur did travel in Time, as several

scholars suggest, this objection falls away. A more compelling

argument for its inauthenticity is the verse style, experimenting uniquely within the Shackspurian canon with strict iambic pentameter composed entirely in rhyming couplets. Whilst dreadful, it is nothing like as appalling as that in Shackspur's earliest known adult writing.

* * *

40

From *Tales from the Matrix – True Stories from TARDIS Logs*

***Retold for Time Tots* by Loom Auntie Flavia, *Panopticon Press*, 6803. 8 Rassilon Era. Part of the Wigner Heisenberg Collection, The Mobile Library, Talking Books Section. Location currently uncertain.**

The Doctor flicked the temporal stabiliser off and pulled down the transitional element control rod taking him out of the Vortex. Quite the wrong way to actualise and quadro-anchor even a Type 40 Time

Capsule, isn't it? Exiting the interstitial continuum at the perihelion of a temporal ellipse can cause serious buffering in your harmonic wave packet transference and sever your main fluid links, can't it?

'Here we are, Stratford on Avon, 1572!' announced the Doctor

proudly and wrongly. If he'd ever bothered to use his Absolute

Tesseractulator to pinpoint his dimensional locations he wouldn't have made these kind of mistakes, of course, but the Tesseractulator had never come out of its box, had it?

Charlotte Pollard, the Doctor's friend, came over to him and flicked on the ceiling scanner.

A friend's an Earth thing. It's a bit like having a colleague or fellow student you co-operate with, but without any exams or project targets at the end to make the co-operation meaningful. There was a fashion for having them on Gallifrey at one time, ask some of your older cousins about it, they might remember.

Charlotte squinted at the view outside. It didn't look like the Stratford she'd visited, with neither alien enslavers nor half timbered tea shops anywhere in sight. 'Are you sure?' she asked.

'Positive. Ish,' replied the Doctor. William Shaxsberd, a young man they'd promised to drop off in 1572, put down his coloured crayons and came to join them.

'It does not look much as it once did, Doctor,' said William, looking at the ceiling and cricking his neck.

The Doctor followed suit. The dustbowl outside was certainly not Warwickshire in any era he'd visited, 'No. Indeed not,' he admitted. 'I think the rift in the Vortex is introducing a random element into my calculations.'

Do you remember the rift in the Vortex, from last time? That's right, the Doctor made that too! It was due to the paradoxical interaction of two paravertical chronostreams further complicated by three retro-temporal augmented causal feedback loops, wasn't it?

'Another random element?' asked Charlotte, 'More random than the way you play "eeny meeny miney mo" with the buttons?'

'Ha, Charley,' said the Doctor. 'Tres amusent.'

Charlotte turned to William to explain, 'That's French, Will, for

"I've been banged to rights, Miss Pollard",' she said.

'I somehow knew,' William replied.

'Really?' asked Charlotte. 'How?'

'It's a Time Lord gift, Charley,' said the Doctor, 'and yes it would be awfully de trop to ask how it works.' Or at least that's what Charlotte thought he said. William heard something quite different of course.

'Well, let's get out there then,' said the Doctor, opening the doors

without taking any proper readings.

‘Er, why?’ asked Charlotte.

‘Because until we know how far out the rift has shunted us in space and time we won’t know how to get to Stratford, 15 diddlydiddly...’

explained the Doctor, waving his hand vaguely as he searched his memory for the end of the four digit number he’d lost interest in.

‘Seventy-two,’ prompted William.

‘The very same.’ The Doctor beamed, ruffling the young man’s hair in a way that, thanks to the TARDIS telepathic circuits alone, seemed endearing rather than insufferable and over familiar.

William and the Doctor headed for the doors. Charlotte was troubled though.

‘Won’t my temporal instability cause untold problems to wherever we are?’ she asked, quite sensibly, all things considered.

‘Oh, very probably, I expect,’ replied the Doctor airily, ‘but if you spent your whole life worrying about the consequences of your actions you’d never get anything done and the consequences of that would be unthinkable, wouldn’t they? Faint heart never bowled a maiden over, you know.’

Charlotte scowled. ‘Mind,’ added the Doctor as he stepped out of the control room, ‘neither did Katie “the Beast” Davies, if I remember my 22nd-century Wisden correctly.’

That was an allusion to the Earth game Cricket, wasn’t it? It was the Earth’s planetary sport, despite the fact that humans were the worst players of it in the galaxy if you remember.

‘Doctor, I find your words confusing,’ said William as he followed him out.

‘It’s a Time Lord gift, Will,’ Charlotte whispered. ’You’ll get used to it.’

* * *

42

From *The Primary Cressida document*

New hides! This keeping a journal business is awfully tricky when you've no paper around, but before mummy died, she did make me

promise I'd write one when I eventually settled down. It's a family tradition that's been handed down for generations apparently, not that I ever saw mummy's.

Anyhow, Troilus is still very eager to settle soon, but where? I've ruled out going east to the Holy Land because from what I remember from history and my travels we'll get no peace there and the rest of the Med and Adriatic has already been bagsied. Troilus reckons Aeneas will have already have set up somewhere by now and we should have gone off on his boat when we had the chance. I just nod, and try to explain wave particle duality to the little ones.

I have a vague feeling I learned something about Aeneas from the UK-201's didactomat box way back in the future. I think he ended up with Dido in Carthage for a bit, which confuses me because I thought Dido's music was Late Classical, which must be after this period, surely. I'm sketchy on the details to be honest. I only remember it was Dido and not Sister Bliss because the planet we crashed into on the way to Astra was named after her.

Funny thinking about Dido, that was the place I've called home

longest in recent years. I've been a nomad a while really – split between London and Liverpool as a girl, never knowing whether to talk posh and southern or not, emigrating to off-Earth with daddy, hopping about through Time with the Doctor, and now traipsing

around Turkey with Troilus and his mates before its even called that or has any tourist facilities to speak of. I think I must have 'space travel in my blood' as one of those Baroque composers put it!

I've been wondering when I should discover electricity and

plumbing a bit recently, these fleeces don't clean themselves like proper clothes, so the sooner we can invent the twin tub the better. Are we before or after that Monk who invented things too early here, I wonder? I don't want to mess things up like he did, but I'm shocking on dates. I just paid attention to the stories in the history books really, not the order they happened in. If I'd known the way round history went was going to be important I would have had the machine teach me it. Of course, as a child you never expect all that history around you is going to run away into the future like it has, do you?

I've decided I'll probably start with a steam engine and see if that messes up my memory of the future. The way I see it, it'll be

impossible for me to invent anything that'll stop me being born so I 43

can't do too much harm.

I casually suggested making things out of iron the other day, which I know is a big step forward but everyone just laughed. Too brittle and hard to work compared to bronze or tin, they said. I suppose they're right. You have to do something to it to make it strong, I remember that. I just don't remember what that something is. For all I know my quad physics equations and could still compose a cogent analygraph for the fall of the Mallatratt Protectorate, I'm a bit rusty on a few of the basics. Going to take us years to get garlic bread and sound radio at this rate.

Of course, I had a bit of training for life without the mod cons on Dido, so I can cope, but what makes things really fiddly at the moment is that my future's past is catching up with my present, which is complicated enough to write down, let alone experience.

We've just bumped into the Doctor as a young man, and I'm sure it's really bad form for me to let on I recognise him when as far as he's concerned he's not met me yet.

From *Not Necessarily the Way I Do It!*

My plan was pretty much the usual one, to go out and see if we could find out the year and our whereabouts in a way that wouldn't arouse any suspicions, and then hang around until nightfall to get a better fix from the position of the stars. It may sound dull but I've found if I do that I usually find something or other to get embroiled in before sunset.

We stepped circumspectly out of the Ship and set off in search of the nearest habitation, ready as ever to improvise any number of cover stories to explain our presence and strange garb. As luck would have it we soon ran into one of the locals, and were able to subtly winkle out the info we needed on route to his encampment.

From *The Dairy of an Edwardian Adventuress*

People say you should never look back of course, advice we've been ignoring since Orpheus and EuroDisney, but I can't help thinking that if the Doctor hadn't landed us in the aftermath of the Trajan War a lot

of that beastly business with the Time Lords might have been avoided later.

As usual the Doctor rejoiced in dropping straight into the middle of things without a moment's forethought. Impossible, exasperating man, I tried to protest but somehow he just brushed my complaints away with a smiled shouldn't have let him, but he did have such a lovely smile.

* * *

44

From *The Pseudo-Shackspur*

The Noble Troyan Woman of Troy

Act 3, Scene 2. Another part of the hillside. Enter Mistress Charley, Doctor Shallow and Young Will.

Doct. Yoohoo! Mister Goatboy, excuse me please,

Could you tell me what time and place is this?

Char. Discreet as ever.

Enter a Goatherd.

Doct.

Yes, but awfully brave.

Young man, there is information we crave.

What land is this and what year are we in?

We've lost track of both in our travelling.

Char. Oh I give up, you're so inconsistent.

Doct. Just smile prettily, act like an assistant.

Char. But I never know what trick you'll pull next!

Doct. Just grit your teeth, smile and stick out your chest;

Magic's best tricks work by misdirection.

Char. So I'm just here to stir his –

Will.

Affection?

Doct. Quite so Will, a pretty face inspires trust.

True, I'm afraid, if not awfully just.

This chap will tell us the time and the place

And Presto well head straight back into Space!

Goat. Eleven eight three BC is the year

This is Hisarlik in Anatolia.

I expect you're traders from Phoenicia

To be garbed and garbling here so queer.

You've been ship wreck'd and concuss'd I'll be bound.

Which'll be why you have no goods around.

We must offer you shelter at the least

Pop back home with me and well have a feast.

Char. How can he know he lives before Our Lord?

Doct. It's just a translation device that's flaw'd.

It's an awfully clever mechanism

But it causes the odd anachronism.

Kind goatherd, we would love to share a meal

And watch the evening stars above us wheel.

For by such means we will precisely know

Our station now and where we next must go.

Exeunt Omnes.

From *Tales from the Matrix*

'Do we really need to do this?' asked Charlotte as the band trudged wearily after the herdsman in their impractical shoes, 'Surely the date and location he's given you is enough?'

'Perhaps,' the Doctor replied, 'but studying the stars will allow me to be more accurate. Besides, I'm famished. We haven't eaten for minus three thousand years, bear in mind.'

So the Doctor and his companions blithely headed off into further temporal confusion, unaware that the goatherd had seen the TARDIS

arrive and knew full well who the Doctor was already.

There's a lesson there for anyone who thinks it's clever to keep their TARDIS in one form, don't you think? The Ionic Column factory

preset might look nice, for example, but when using it means every Grun, Za and Caius in the Cosmos knows who you are immediately, it rather defeats the point of a chameleon circuit.

From *The Primary Cressida document*

One of our herdsmen saw the TARDIS arrive in the next valley this afternoon and instantly recognised it as the mobile temple that had prefigured the city's fall, and the Doctor as a younger version of the old man from my tales.

He sent his mate back to tell us so we all had time to prepare

ourselves and could all pretend we believed the Doctor's implausible story about being a trader from Phoenicia when he turned up an hour or so later.

It's definitely him, probably about 40 years before we met. He

dresses similarly, his hair is curlier and darker and his face looks a bit different, but the years are never kind, are they? Amazingly, he's almost as vague as a young man as he was when old, if not quite so ummy and erry. I'd always assumed that was because he was getting on a bit.

Thankfully, no one here's too thrown by the idea of time travellers after me relating all my adventures to them, though one of the boys

did ask me why the Doctor didn't walk and talk backwards when his past 46

was in the future. I was very clear why not when I started explaining it, but I must admit I got a bit confused as I went along.

He hasn't recognised me of course, dear diary, and we've invited him and his friends to have tea tonight.

From *Not Necessarily the Way I Do It!*

Well, imagine my embarrassment when we arrived at the fellow's

encampment and who was in charge but my old friend Vicki (now

calling herself Cressida of course) and her new husband Troilus, who I'd never actually met, due to quite heavy escaping commitments around the time they got together.

I realised with a start that young Bill Shakespeare was due to write a play about this couple in a few years, and that unless I was careful this meeting would almost certainly be what inspired it, thus complicating Bill's already tortuous history further and bringing yet another new paradox to mine. I'd only let Vicki go away with Troilus at Troy's fall because once I heard she was calling herself Cressida I'd assumed it was predestined (well, I was young, I believed in that kind of thing), I knew there was a play about the couple by Shakespeare and thought I was helping history take its course by hitching them up. Now, if I'd only done that because my future actions would one day bring that play about, I'd accidentally made a big chunk of my past dependent on my future, which, as you know, isn't really the accepted way of going about things.

I reasoned it was vital for the tidiness of the time line that I kept Bill from learning the background of Troilus and Cressida in any detail, ideally forgetting as much of their present as he could too.

To complicate matters further, Vicki had actually seen Bill as an adult on my time telly, the Time Space Visualiser. She was never the most historically careful of girls, and I feared that if she found out who he was, she'd probably tell him all about his future at the court of Elizabeth and getting the commission to write *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and the inspiration for *Hamlet* on the same day and how he'd sprained his wrist in his rush to write both.

All it might take, I thought, would be one slip from any one of us,

accidentally mentioning the words TARDIS or Zeus Plug over dessert, say, and causality would be tangled up like President Pandak's kittens in twine, quicker than you could explain what you pop in a Ganymede socket.

Luckily, it seemed Vicki hadn't spotted how anachronistic our garb was and hadn't realised I was her old friend, seeming to completely swallow my inventive tales of sea faring, despite Charley's rather 47

fanciful insertions about hook-handed pirates.

I had, of course, underestimated her, as a quick and entirely

accidental glance at her diary before dinner proved. Not knowing I could regenerate, she had taken me for my young self in my first form and thought she was protecting me from foreknowledge!

This, of course, suited my purpose. All I reckoned I had to do now to save Time from chewing itself to bits was keep Will busy and make sure Vicki didn't relate her history to any of us over dinner.

Oh what tangled webs we weave, when tidy temporal strands we try to leave.

From *The Dairy of an Edwardian Adventuress*

Mr and Mrs Troilus seemed a sweet couple, he a lanky chap with a curly beard and a well-meaning expression and she a rather

enthusiastic young thing with big eyes, yet the Doctor had become rather shifty from the moment we met them. I knew he was

preoccupied by something, but I had, at that time, no idea what. After some fun, improvising tales of derring-do on the high seas to prove our credentials as traders, he took me to one side and explained that I had to get Wilf as squiffy as possible at the feast that night for reasons it was simpler at that moment not to explain. He said history depended on me getting the boy so drunk he could neither speak nor remember his behaviour the next morning. I'm normally quite good at that kind of thing, it was hardly my fault the Bawd was a functioning alcoholic at the age of eight.

From *The Pseudo-Shackspur*

The Noble Troyan Woman of Troy

Act 4, Scene 1. An encampment in the mountains. Enter Mistress Charley, Doctor Shallow, Young Will, a goatherd, Troilus, Cressida, divers villagers and guards severally.

Doct. Hello. (*Aside*) Her! 'Tis Vicki, I should have guess'd.

I never with good geography was bless'd

Hisarlik is the modern name for Troy.

Quite a temporal tangle, boy oh boy!

(*To Cress.*) Ha ha, my hearties! We here are sailors three.

(*Aside*) I can but hope she does not see 'tis me.

Cress. (*Aside*) Deceit upon deception! Can this be

The Doctor who I first took it to be?

Is this him when young as I assumed?

Or must deeper deceit be presumed?

I'll play along until the truth I know.

(*To Doct.*) Good mariners, welcome and hello.

Will. (*To Char.*) What's this strange accented charade about?

Char. (*To Will*) Who knows, we'll be, I bet, last to find out.

From *Tales from the Matrix*

Yes Time Tots, exactly! The first thing any of us would have done would have been to get out of there quickly before we compromised the causal nexus. Staying for tea and imbibing too much ethanol, which you'll recall the Doctor had a particular weakness for on his mother's side, doesn't strike any of us as sensible!

From *The Secondary Cressida document* (a transcribed fragment allegedly found at a Church of Rome jumble sale) – *Even More*

***Suppressed Texts of the Vatican Library*, A Hatper-Mysteria-Ellerycorp Press Original, 2977 CE**

My ruse worked, the robot's read my carefully exposed diary and thinks I suspect nothing! He's so obviously not really the Doctor it's not true, but he doesn't know I know that yet, so we have the

advantage. He's definitely a Dalek robot double like that other one they sent after us.

They've probably made him the young Doctor this time to make it less obvious. He does look a bit like he could be him sometimes if you're not paying attention, but if you look closely his face is all wrong and his voice goes a bit funny sometimes like that other robot's did, almost doing my accent at times! I think he's probably feeding on my jumbled memories or something.

We'll overpower him and his companions at dinner tonight and

destroy them, they won't expect me to know how to deactivate them.

From *Not Necessarily the Way I Do It!*

I've always been keen on wine, particularly the heavier oaky reds, though I find there is a rather tiresome tendency for them to be drugged by villainous blackguards sometimes, rather impairing the subtleties of the flavour, but wine in the Homeric era was quite a different

proposition. What can I tell you about it except that it tasted awful but did the job?

It wasn't the heavily resinated stuff the Greeks later went in for, thankfully, nor indeed that watered-down muck the ancient Romans used to dish out at parties, but I think it's telling that the most flattering 49

thing Homer had to say about it in the whole of *The Iliad* was how like the sea it was in hue. When you bear in mind he was blind, you can tell he'd had to ask around a bit to find anyone with something positive to say about it.

The food wasn't much better either. It can be terribly hard eating out when you travel like I do. These days at home, I generally try to eat only things that don't have a central nervous system, or that I've knocked up in the food machine, but sometimes, when you're a guest, qualms like that have to go out of the window, particularly on worlds ruled by intelligent plants, where you're best advised not to ask for a celery stick and to just stick your toes in damp soil like everyone else

at the table.

Even then I try to stick to my principles and not eat anything with a sense of self, parliamentary democracy or sultanas in it.

This dinner was a particularly awkward affair; Charley acting like a slightly sloshed pirate queen, Vicki acting like she didn't know me, Bill acting up, singing lewd madrigals that officially weren't due for invention yet in his rather reedy girlish voice, and all the while me worrying about causality falling apart around me rather too much to fully enjoy the dolmades.

Suddenly, half way through the proceedings, the impossible

happened: it took a turn for the worse. Vicki shouted out 'Now!', lunged at my chest and started tearing at my waistcoat.

From *The Dairy of an Edwardian Adventuress*

My recollections of the ensuing events are somewhat hazy; I had been struggling to match young Wilt measure for measure, you might say, when I saw the Doctor being attacked. I launched myself at his

assailant and missed, I'm told, briefly losing my dignity and

consciousness in the process.

A shocking melee ensued by all accounts, with Trajans tearing at our clothes with cutlery and all the usual business with tables being turned and the like breaking out; I'm only glad I can't remember the full details, because what little I do makes me blush quite enough.

It's quite possible I told someone I loved them, and was sick later too. I've never been brave enough to ask. The next thing I remember clearly was being in the main tent with the Doctor explaining a lot and me apologising a bit, just in case.

From *The Pseudo-Shackspur*

The Noble Troyan Woman of Troy

Act 5, Scene 2. At dinner beneath the stars.

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Cress. Take that, false Doctor! But where are your wires?

In sparks and puffs of smoke you should expire.

Could it be that you are the Doctor true?

Char. Get your claws off him, he's mine, you wild shrew!

Will. Oh, Pillicock sat on pillicock

Char. Will you stop that terrible singing, Will?

The Doctor and I are under attack

From this Troyan host, while you're supping sack.

Join in the scrap and cease your carousel

Lewd songs, anyhow, douse all arousal.

Doct. Vicki, Will, Charley, all, put down those knives!

You're all making the mistakes of your lives.

Cress. Vicki, you say? You should not know that yet.

If you're the young Doctor, we've not yet met.

Doct. Vicki, the reason that I know your name

Is that inwardly I am still the same

Man who left you at Troy some years ago,

I can change my looks, if you didn't know.

Char. Doctor, do you mean that you know this wench?

Doct. We travelled together many years hence.

I think it's time I explain'd the full truth

Of why I've deceived you all, forsooth.

Will. If she's an old friend then tell me why

You did keep that fact from Charley and I?

Doct. This is an old friend, Will, but, what is worse,

She features, in decasyllabic verse,

In a drama that you shall one day pen

That means I shall leave her with this Troyan,

If you only write it because you're here

Chronological conundra appear.

Effects and causes whirl and spin about,

Go through the wringer and turn inside out.

The egg that hatches out your chicken

Does in that self same chicken thicken.

* * *

51

From *Tales from the Matrix*

Then in direct contravention of fifteen universal laws of Time and two local statutes, the Doctor sat down and explained everything that had happened, and, in explaining it, he brought all the things he was worried about happening that hadn't into the open, didn't he?

Of course, it turned out that some of the things he was worried about were of no concern at all, but as a result of relating them he brought worse problems about.

I expect most of you have read stories about the Doctor in other books, and I expect some of you think he's quite clever, even though he breaks a lot of rules, don't you? Well, you're right! In a crisis, he's just the kind of person you need around, he can come up with ideas almost no one else could. The only problem is, when you're not having a crisis, he's just the kind of person to cause one.

From *The Primary Cressida document*

How embarrassing. It turns out the Doctor was the Doctor after all, only older and with a new face for some strange reason. The girl who drinks too much is his latest companion and the little boy with the dirty songs and the voice like a girl is William Shakespeare! Nice

enough lad, no wonder he ends up in the theatre with that voice though, perfect for all those drag roles they gave boys. We had a lovely chat about Dido and Aeneas and told each other about our scrapes with the

Daleks, and I let slip the odd thing I knew about his future.

He's told me we should go and settle in England. Apparently there's an old book he's read by a chap called Geoffrey that says relatives of Aeneas were the first Britons I think it's a super idea, ' know Troilus will like it in England, and I think we've persuaded the Doctor too!

Just think! could be one of my own ancestors passing on my secret diaries for years and years, a bit like mummy's family did! How smashing would that be?

From *Not Necessarily the Way I Do It!*

Of course I decided in the end that honesty would be the best policy and that as long as everyone knew the full facts, and swore not to be influenced by them, we could probably darn the hole in causality in such a way that it wouldn't show. I sat everyone down in the central tent and explained. Well, what a Charlie I looked!

* * *

52

From *The Dairy of an Edwardian Adventuress*

Ridiculously, the Doctor had been worried about Wilf getting

inspiration for the play *Troilus and Cressida* from meeting the real Troilus and Cressida! I protested that Wilf had already read his own plays in the future anyhow, but the Doctor countered that they'd have been corrupted playing texts and in a court of law it would be hard to prove that was down to him, whereas if Will had got any of the plot or characterisation directly through his adventures with us that was a bit more serious.

That was when Will started laughing.

From *The Pseudo-Shackspur*

The Noble Troyan Woman of Tray

Act 5, Scene 4. A tent in the camp.

Will. But Doctor, I did not invent the tale

Of Troilus and Cressida's love that fail'd.

Why, Geoffrey Chaucer told it years ago!

I cannot believe that you did not know.

Have you read even half of what you claim

Or do you just like dropping well-known names?

Cressida's tale is part of tradition

Not the result of my precognition

Of future perfect past present events,

If you will forgive me my mangled tense,

And my quondumque futures version

Should have put you off this girl's desertion.

Char. You should have read your *Brodie's Notes on* Will.

The phantom threat you feared from his quill

Was nothing but an insubstantial shade,

And there's a real spectre here I'm afraid.

I'm half a ghost of Christmas yet to come,

Remember, I've made history come undone.

You've got paradoxes enough to be

Getting on with, as far as I can see,

So why do you search for new ones instead

That only exist inside of your head?

Doct. If I had known the work of me laddo

Would I have found menace in my shadow?

I here resolve to watch much less TV

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And be the reader I do claim to be.

For half my erudite orations

Come straight from books of quotations.

From *Tales from the Matrix*

‘What was Helen of Troy actually like then?’ asked William Shaxberd as he helped himself to more wine.

‘ *Is*,’ corrected the Doctor, prissily.

‘She’s a good egg by all accounts,’ said Vicki, politely not mentioning the fact she thought her looks had gone, ‘and Menelaus was happy enough to have her back, even after all the bother, so she must be quite nice when you get to know her, I suppose.’

‘Well, she would have to be a good egg really,’ said William, ‘Her father was a swan supposedly.’ Like most young human men of his generation, he knew the salacious bits of Greek Mythology surprisingly well.

‘Half human on his mother’s side?’ smiled the Doctor, thinking

himself clever. ‘Aren’t we all?’

‘No, just men,’ said Charlotte through a falafel.

‘She has two birthdays they say, one when the egg came out of her mother and another when it hatched,’ Troilus revealed, leaning forward over the table and whispering in that conspiratorial manner people sometimes do when divulging well known but dubious trivia.

‘It would have been an easy birth if she was born an egg,’ said Vicki ruefully, one hand on her stomach.

‘An easy lay, you mean,’ William corrected.

‘So Paris said –’Troilus began, his eyes a twinkle.

He was shouted down by his wife seconds later, barrack room tale untold, and one of those awkward silences ensued that dinner party guests in all cultures and times know only too well.

'Have you actually read *Troilus and Cressida*, Doctor?' asked Charlotte a little later.

'You ask me, who had a hand in some of Shakespeare's finest work –

who put the mixed metaphor in the "To be or not to be" soliloquy, who hired the bear for *The Winter's Tale*, and who really shouldn't have passed on the story of *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, if I've read *Troilus and Cressida*?' replied the Doctor, rather over-egging it in that way he usually did when he was on the defensive.

'Yes!' they cried as one.

'Well, no,' admitted the Doctor. 'It's supposed to be one of the better ones, and well, you know, I've been busy. I've still not managed to tune the Time Space Visualiser in to catch all of *The Golden Girls* and I've 54

been trying for decades.'

'She doesn't end up with Troilus in it, she ends up with Diomede, and it's set during the war not after it!' said Charlotte patiently.

'Diomede! That was Steven!' Vicki laughed.

The Doctor looked confused. 'Vicki and Steven were just friends, weren't you? Just the odd haircut and getting locked up together, I thought.'

'Yes, that's right, how many times do we have to go through that?'

Vicki explained, giving a petulant Troilus a peck on the cheek.

'Well the legend must have got a bit confused by the time it got written down I think Chaucer got it from a foreign book,' said William, draining his goblet.

The Doctor beamed, thinking he'd got away with his tinkering again.

'So Troilus and Cressida weren't predestined after all!' he said

'Well, only because of your lack of reading,' snorted Charlotte.

‘Oh that is a relief,’ said the Doctor taking the wine jug from William and helping himself without asking.

‘Now what about this business of giving us charts to help us reach this Britain young Will spoke of?’ asked Troilus, passing the Doctor a goat’s cheese nibble.

‘I really shouldn’t,’ explained the Doctor. ‘If you go there, on the basis of the frankly dubious history of Geoffrey of Monmouth then Vicki is in danger of becoming one of her own descendants, which is at least as bad as the things I’ve been trying to prevent all day.’

‘Oh go on Doctor, please!’ begged Vicki. ‘We could mine tin in

Cornwall and I’d promise not to invent anything I shouldn’t as long as I lived, not even roller skates!’

‘I don’t think I should. I’ve made enough of a mess looking after young Charley here, the repercussions of me sending you to Britain because the unborn Shakespeare suggested it could be horrendous,’ said the Doctor, finally being responsible for once in his lives.

‘Oh go on Doctor, I’m unborn too, remember, so that shouldn’t matter much,’ said Vicki.

‘And I’m only half here,’ said Charlotte grimly ‘Why stop messing about now? You should have stayed at home watching these *Golden Girls* of yours if you weren’t prepared to get involved in real people’s lives. They’re messy and not always in the order you’d like and sometimes too short, and they’re not always better for having you in them, but you either face that or hide away somewhere, don’t you?’

The Doctor kissed her.

‘What was that for?’ asked Charlotte.

‘To shut you up,’ he said. He tapped Vicki on the nose and smiled,

’Come on, let’s carry on the party, and in the morning, when rosy-55

fingered Dawn has done her bit, we’ll sort out a good map of Europe for the Trojans and get them started on their boats. Any consequences which haven’t happened yet we can worry about later!’

Some of you will be shocked at just how naughty the Doctor was in this story: jeopardising the stability of all those will-have-might-have-

been futures out there depending on him by interweaving all those strands of destiny connected to the Dalek race and all on the basis of a whim.

The Doctor already knew Dalek causality was partially snagged in a loop in Time and his friend was the focus of a temporal anomaly, but of course he *had* spent a jolly long time in the Vortex, hadn't he?

That meant his causal connections to events future, past and maybe-somehow were a great deal more jumbled up than most people's and he was quite good at judging just how likely to snaggle the Web of Time his whims might be.

Or so he thought.

The Doctor believed in two very wrong things you see; firstly, in something he called personal morality that he thought was more

important than doing the things simply everyone knows are right, and secondly, that he was cleverer than everyone else and could always sort things out.

He deserved what happened to him next, didn't he?

Document from the Braxiatel Collection Shakespearean Ephemera wing, a note found in the effects of William Shakespeare by literary assessor Porlock. It is not believed to be in Shakespeare's hand though it bears some graphological similarities to the disputed Scarlioni *Hamlet* manuscript.

List of things not to mention

* The Daleks,

* That you've met me before when we meet next (because you

didn't mention it last time, you know),

* That you've read *half* your plays already

* That I wrote all the good bits in *Hamlet*,

['good bits' later amended to 'rubbish bits' in a different hand]

* The idea of cigars (until Raleigh gets back from abroad),

* That cigars will end up named after some of your characters,

* That someone called Raleigh will go abroad,

* That Troilus and Cressida had a lovely marriage and lived

happily ever after in Mousehole, no matter how the story goes

in Chaucer,

* Oh, the places you've gone and the things that you've seen.

A Boy's Tale

Gary Russell

Hello

This was the Doctor's idea – I hope you can make sense of this. I'm not used to writing. Numbers I can deal with. But actually putting words down on a screen... well, that's all new to me. Back home, I never needed to write much. Reading was easy, we had the manuals to learn, and the Starliner computers taught us the basics, but the Deciders never got us to write much down.

The Doctor has tried his best to show me how to use the TARDIS

databank to compose this. I rather think he's as unsure as I was but I quickly picked it up. I also pointed out one or two subroutines that he could use that would make his life a bit easier. I'm not entirely sure that he was grateful – he muttered something under his breath I couldn't hear. Anyway, I'm writing this note to you because... well... I miss you. I felt... close to you for the few weeks we knew each other, you understood me more in that time than anyone back home ever did. I'm grateful for that. We barely had a chance to say goodbye by the Gateway and I think that's a shame. I know the Doctor misses you too. He keeps wandering around the corridors muttering about 'change and decay' and how although nothing stays the same, he'd rather it did now and again. I've put aside some time to do a few calculations. I thought if I could navigate us safely back through a CVE, one day we might come back and see how you're getting on. I think he'd like that, and I know I would.

So, what have we been up to? Well, we went to a planet called Traken, where I met this wonderful girl. She was called Nyssa and she and her father looked after us. It's funny – I don't really remember my parents, but spending time with Nyssa and Tremas brought back a sort of image of them

in my sleep. I've never really tried picturing them before – Varsh was my only family for so long – but ever since Traken, I've got a really distinct image in my mind of what they looked like. Especially my mother. I can't talk to the Doctor about my family – I'm not sure he really understands the idea of family. I'm not sure I do really; as a child, 58

my parents quickly realised that I had a flair for pure mathematics. A genius, they said. So when I was about eight, I was put into the Starliner's accelerated learning programme. By the time I was about twelve, I knew more than my parents and Varsh put together. Which probably explains why Varsh and his friends 'dropped out' as Decider Nefred called it. I think my parents were very ashamed. It wasn't long afterwards that they died in a farming accident.

I haven't told anyone about this before. You're so much easier to talk to. Although maybe that's because you're not actually here to tell me I'm being irrational. Or go away because you're too busy being the Doctor's assistant!

Anyway, the other night, after we said goodbye to everyone on Traken, I had a dream. I suppose you were partly responsible for it... no, no that's not right. Inspirational, I think the Doctor would say. I so want to be like him, you know. Is that normal?

Anyway, it was a dream about an actual incident that happened during my dreary existence back on Alzarius and the point it illustrated made me think of you. Hence this letter, as the Doctor calls it.

All right, so there I am, in class when someone speaks to me from the computer...

'Good morning everybody. To access today's lessons, please use the keyword "TERRARIUM".'

I was sitting alone, at my terminal, aware that in all the other dorms around the colony, other youngsters were doing the same work, hearing the same voices, seeing the same images. Like bees in a hive, we all went through the same motions. Conforming.

There was a brief pause, which allowed me to mumble 'Terraarium'

at the Voice Activated Response point, and as soon as I had done so, the Hall of Learning banner on my screen rearranged its pixels to form the moving face of the Electronic Tutor, who smiled, insincerely as always, at me. And at the other students on-line at that moment.

'Well done,' said the Electronic Tutor (I had selected Decider

Nefred today, as I'd grown to dislike Decider Draith over the last few weeks). 'Now, can you tell me what this is?'

The image rearranged itself yet again, forming a strange shape that I simply did not recognise. I stared at the screen, frowning, but still nothing came to me.

I could imagine all the other children answering their selected Tutor's image, and receiving a 'Very well done' as a result. That just made it worse.

'Seventy-four per cent of respondents have successfully identified this image,' Decider Nefred said, without any hint of criticism, 59

although I knew there had to be some in there somewhere. 'If a red crystal appears in the top right-hand corner...'

'...Of your screen,' I mimicked, 'You've either answered incorrectly, or not answered at all.'

A red crystal materialised in the top right-hand corner of my screen.

'Oh, what a surprise,' I muttered.

'You now have another twelve seconds in which to answer

correctly.' Decider Nefred was still smiling.

'Decider Nefred' was, after all, nothing more than an artificial creation of the computer – one of fifteen available images that could be selected by students so that they could feel comfortable with their tutors. Zayn over in Dorm 14 always went for Decider Tannek because he said she looked like his sister and therefore he could tell Decider Tannek to shut up without fear of getting thumped. Jiana in Dorm 36

wanted Decider Draith because he had a beard and she found that comforting. Zayn and I had hacked into Jiana's VAR point once and deleted Decider Draith just to annoy her. We never knew if we were really successful in this as Jiana never mentioned Decider Draith again.

Jiana never said she couldn't access him, she just stopped talking about lessons.

Perhaps she stopped taking them. Her parents were running short of help on their fruit farm since the plague of Larralice last summer and

they needed everyone they could use to get new crops grown.

I realised I hadn't seen Jiana for a while. I should have rectified that. I never did.

'You have failed to identify the image. Click on the icon for more information.'

The top of my screen was suddenly occupied by a series of icons.

One of them was a tiny version of the main image. The oddly shaped...

thing. I reached out and touched it.

'More information, please,' I said to the VAR point.

Immediately the tiny image zoomed out, the word DOG at the

bottom of the screen.

A new face, one I'd never seen before (and was, probably, non-

reprogrammable), appeared. It was an older woman, her white hair cropped tightly to her scalp.

'You have requested information on the species known as "dog".

Canis Familiaris, a subset of the family Canidae.'

Other images flashed up, including things identified as FOX, WOLF, JACKAL.

'Please select further information from the following.' More icons.

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WILD. DOMESTIC. HISTORY. EXTINCTION.

My fingered hovered over the icons and then jabbed at DOMESTIC.

Instead of the voice talking to me, the screen was lined with text, certain words highlighted in capitalised red hotlinks

THE DOG IS A CARNIVOROUS ANIMAL, WITH UNIQUE LIMBS

EVOLVED FOR SPEED AND AGILITY. IT HAS AN ACUTE SENSE OF

SMELL, MAKING IT A HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL PREDATOR AND

HUNTER. DOGS WERE FIRST DOMESTICATED PRIOR TO THE TWENTY-FIFTH ERA. FOR MANY CENTURIES DOGS WERE USED IN HUNTS AS WELL AS FOR PULLING CARTS AND SLEDGES IN A VARIETY OF CULTURES.

MORE RECENTLY, DOGS WERE ADOPTED AS PETS, MOST NOTABLY BEFORE THE GREAT EXODUS PERIOD. THERE WERE OVER FIVE HUNDRED DIFFERENT BREEDS OF DOG THROUGHOUT THE FOUR CORE-WORLDS OF OUR BIRTH BEFORE THE START OF THIS PERIOD. ON TERRADON, DOGS WERE VICTIMS OFTHE TORRIS PLAGUE.

I told the computer to stop. I tapped the keyword PETS.

A PET WAS AN ANIMAL KEPT BY TERRADONIANS FOR COMPANIONSHIP AND/OR PLEASURE. THE MOST COMMON PETS WERE DOGS, CATS, ASSORTED SPECIES OF BIRDS, AND FISH. AFTER THE TORRIS PLAGUE, DOMESTICATED ANIMALS WERE OUTLAWED FOR FEAR THAT THE PLAGUE THEY CARRIED WOULD BE PASSED ON TO THE COLONIES. AS A RESULT, HOLOGRAPHIC PETS WERE INTRODUCED TO THE STARLINERS, BUT WITHIN TWO GENERATIONS THIS FAD HAD PASSED AND

'Stop!'

I stared at the screen, then retouched the dog icon. I realised that the other icons must be other animals and I pressed some of those,

absorbing as much information as I could.

After about thirty minutes more reading, I tapped an icon that was permanently on the side of the screen.

Immediately the screen was filled with the face of another boy, with light hair and freckles.

‘Hullo, Adric, you’re interrupting tutorials again. You know what my mother, and yours, said about that last time.’

I shrugged, ‘This is important, Zayn. Did you recognise the image?’

‘The dog? Yeah, of course. You didn’t?’

I shook my head, ’I’ve never heard of them. I want to find out more.’

‘Why?’ Zayn frowned. ‘Not like you to want to do more learning

than you have to.’

‘It’s not that. It’s this idea of... of pets. I want to understand...’ I paused. ‘Did your mother have any pets?’

‘How should I know?’

I muttered a few more things, including that I’d call Zayn back later
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and went back to my researches.

I punched up information on the Torris Plague.

This time, another face appeared. It was a young woman, her hair in braids, with small earrings.

I smiled at this – earrings hadn’t been back in fashion since the jewellery craze a couple of years before. Marsh’s friend Keara wore them lots back then. She looked pretty when she did, they somehow made her smile stretch the whole length of her face. I never thought about that until now. Nyssa’s smile was the same – and she didn’t need earrings to look nice. Anyway...

This had to be an old image. Which meant it was a real person. This was history – this woman had once been real, her thoughts and words burned into an encryption disc at some point.

‘Date of origin?’ I asked the computer.

A red line of dialogue appeared at the top of the screen, while the earring-wearing woman was frozen in mid-sentence.

THIS RECORDING DATES FROM THE FORTIETH PERIOD ON

TERRADON AND FEATURES PROFESSOR HARLOF DISCUSSING

THE EFFECTS OF THE TORRIS PLAGUE.

A second later, the image unfroze and Professor Harlof continued her talk.

And with growing horror, I listened.

It was about three hours later that I was sitting in the kitchen of Zayn's family dorm, staring down at the Starliner far below through the trees.

Zayn's family, like mine, had opted to live out of the ship itself. Zayn's father, however, had built their house himself, entirely from the trees and other natural things they found on the hillside as opposed to using supplies from the Starliner. To many, Zayn's family were... eccentric.

To me, they were unique. And wonderful.

I was aware that Zayn was fidgeting. He had tried to show me some new game from the E-system. Normally, I would have enthusiastically played it as many times as Zayn wanted to, but not today. I'm not fond of games and things, but I could usually help Zayn find his way around them because I was better at logical reasoning than he was.

Today, however, all I could think about was how empty Zayn's

garden was.

Which was stupid as it was always this empty. Or full. Depending on how you looked at it. Nothing was missing, nothing had been moved.

But something which I felt *ought* to be there *wasn't*.

Zayn's mother arrived home from her day replenishing the

Starliner's drive components. I knew exactly what Zayn's mother did,
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because mine did the same.

'Hello boys,' she said, smelling slightly of oil. 'Done today's work?'

Zayn nodded without actually looking at his mother – he was

following the subroutines I'd shown him, and yet still couldn't quite

complete the game.

And normally, I say too much. Zayn's family thought I was a bit weird. 'Egrarious', I'd overheard his Mother say to his father once.

Which from a couple of eccentrics like them was both ironic and, to be honest, slightly insulting. But I suppose it wasn't their fault I was brainier than both of them and Zayn together.

But today, I asked her a question.

'Did you ever have a dog as a pet? Or a cat?'

And Zayn's mother froze, frowning at me. 'A pet? How old d'you

think I am, young Adric?' But then she smiled. 'Seriously, no of course not. But my great-grandparents probably did, I think, back home. Just before the Torris Plague.' She sat down opposite me. 'And therefore sometime before I was born, in case you were wondering!'

'What pet did they have?'

Zayn called over from his terminal. 'Adric's just annoyed because he didn't know what a dog was in today's tutorial. '

'I'm not annoyed,' I snapped back. 'Well, not because of that. But I wondered how people felt about pets back then. And whether they were angry with the Prime Deciders as a result.'

Zayn's mother thought about it, and then shrugged, 'They had a dog, I think. I saw holograms of it, I do know that. Maybe two dogs.' She laughed,' They even gave them names, you know.'

'What is this Torris Plague anyway?' Zayn had given up on the

game now after his third attempt and sat on the floor next to me.

I breathed in. This she did know. She explained that Professor Harlof had done research on a mysterious illness which had struck animals on the Terradonian continent Prolside. Within weeks, many had died out.

After two months, everything had gone.

It was only when this plague transferred to people that a confession came from the Wattnill Continent.

The Tanis company had created a toxin that was infectious to

anything with a small respiratory system – smaller than a human's anyway – or so they claimed. But the infection had mutated and killed larger animals. Shortly before this was revealed, a set of skirmishes had broken out between some of the smaller continents and the

Annexed Islands. Not exactly a world war, but it started the first wave of colonisations and migrations that eventually led to the Starliner crashing on Alzarius – Alzarius, by the way, is an old Terradonian word for 'island' . I knew from history classes that the first generations

referred to the planet as Alzarius that way because it inspired hope that, although safe, they would eventually return to the 'mainland', i.e.

Terradon. After more generations than anyone cared to recall, we were still hoping.

It transpired that this Torris Plague had been deliberately created to kill people. Germ warfare was banned under the Continental Treaties, after the East Province Disaster so this less obvious method was utilised. The intention had been to infect small animals, specifically pets, after which the infection would then transfer to their human owners, a majority of which included children. This would make the Prolside children sterile and within a generation or two, the Wattnill would have enough room for their own, always increasing population.

Instead, the plague began killing people outright. The very young, very old and already ill were the first victims. The plague attacked the immune system, breaking down the body's defence mechanisms,

ensuring that anyone with a slight cold or in some cases nothing more than seasonal hayfever died within weeks. It was not long before the disease hit the Wattnills themselves and the call for help went out.

Professor Harlof's recording had been made when a multicontinental *team* had been given permission by the Wattnills to enter their territories and try to contain the disease. Many millions of their children had similarly died and Torris realised that their 'desperate and pathetic attempts to create a world monopoly' (according to Professor Harlot) were affecting their own lands. Prolside scientists did find a cure but for a majority of the world's animal population, it came too late. And then the revenge started – any animal not needed for food was hunted down and exterminated, in case it still harboured

the plague. No one went near them without special containment suits.

Professor Harlof's report showed images of people in yellow suits shooting animals; huge bonfires of carcasses; reports of people being fined or even imprisoned for trying to protect their pets.

A massive hysterical overreaction, I think, but then again, I hadn't been there. Lived through it.

Zayn's mother concluded by telling us that as far as she was aware, Torris had vanished overnight and the Wattnills had kept themselves to

!themselves.

'No one knows even now how many people Terradon still supports,'

she added, standing up and offering us both riverfruit juice.

We refused politely, and I asked again about pets. Did none survive to go with the colonists?

Zayn's mother shrugged. 'As I recall, my ancestors said that after 64

this, all pets were put down.'

'Put down?' Zayn didn't understand.

'Killed. Exterminated en masse.' She sighed, 'I suppose it simply was not worth the risk that more people could become infected. Which is just as well, as there still aren't enough young people around today.'

She suddenly sat down and frowned. 'You know, I remember when I was little, wondering why the stories I was reading in the Starliner databases were of boys and girls having adventures. And yet, there was only me and two other girls in our classes.' She shivered, 'I haven't thought about this in years, you know. But I remember asking my father why I didn't have many friends and he said to blame it on the dogs.' Her face took on a kind of faraway look, and I guessed she was bringing the image of her father to mind. Of her childhood. Years ago.

I was glad I wasn't born then. It must have been so dreary. 'Blame it on the dogs... how unfair.' She looked back at us. 'It wasn't the dogs'

fault.' With a sigh she got up and walked away, into the dorm. 'It wasn't the poor animals' fault.' The last bit was lost under a very loud

clatter of mugs and riverfruit being moved.

‘I’m going to go to the Deciders’Hall of Records,’ I stated.

Zayn was rather surprised at this – the Hall of Records was

somewhere that the other kids would threaten to send their mates, where the King Marshman lived and would capture them and force

them to endure Mistfall for eternity.

‘We could get there in half an hour,’ I said.

‘Why?’

‘Because there might be pictures of animals there.’

‘So?’

‘So. I want to see a dog.’

‘They’re only holograms, Adric. And besides, we can see them on the screen.’

I had already reopened this afternoon’s tutorial window, looking at an image of a dog. It was small, black and had big, rather sad eyes. I touched the screen, tracing the outline of its nose (a small tag reading MUZZLE appeared), then its ears (rather pointlessly, a tag saying EARS

replaced MUZZLE) and down its neck.

‘People had these in their dorms, Zayn. They looked after them, fed them, walked them and cuddled them. Why?’

‘I don’t know. Seems lame to me. Why not just make do with these images?’

‘No!’ I was sure that was wrong. How could something made up of pixels and electronic data possibly be better than a real, living, breathing... animal. A pet. Zayn, I need to go to the Hall of Records.

Maybe something there will tell me more about pets. About dogs and...

what are you doing?'

Zayn was putting his jacket on. 'Coming with you, of course. I

mean, someone's got to look out for you. lf you go on your own, the others will think you're stupid. if we both go, we can say it was a dare.

"Visiting the Chief Marshman!"'

'And your mother?'

'She's thinking about dinner. She always does that before Dad gets back. C'mon, let's go.'

With a last look at the black dog with the sad eyes, I followed my friend out.

Friend. I realise now that Zayn was probably the only friend I ever had in E-space. I hope he got back to Terradon all right, even if it wasn't his real ancestral home. You know, one day, I'd like to find out if they made it.

Getting to the Hall of Records was easy – not many people walked through the Starliner corridors this late in the evening. The constant replacing and replenishing of circuits and components was done for the day, but tomorrow, the Great Embarkation would be another day

closer.

We reached the inner corridors in twenty minutes, and although

Zayn was panting with the exertion (normally he'd avoid leaving his family dorm unless we went swimming) I strode on. A big sign on one side of the doors said HALL OF RECORDS. DECIDER PERMISSION

TO ENTER REQUIRED AT ALL TIMES.

Seconds later, Decider Draith was behind us, a hand on each of our shoulders.

'Hello,' he said suspiciously to Zayn and I. 'What do you want?'

'I want to see the books,' I said. Zayn sighed and tried to look in the direction, hoping the old man wouldn't think we were together. I saw this and said forcibly, 'Both of us.'

Zayn grinned falsely at the man, 'Yeah. Real books made of paper.

His idea, not mine.'

The old man smiled, 'Of course, enquiring minds should be

encouraged,' and he opened the doors and let us through. 'Use the database to find the records you want. The books are arranged

alphabetically. I'll return in twenty minutes.'

I was already at a dataport, searching for details of animals.

Five minutes later, Zayn stood shuffling self-consciously, while I flipped through a badly maintained book of dogs. Every so often, a full-colour picture took up a whole page.

'Zayn, look at them. They... they're beautiful.'

'Yeah, right, whatever.' Zayn clearly wanted to be somewhere else.

'This was a stupid idea, Adric. I mean if anyone sees us in here. One of the Outlers! We'll never live it down.'

'Oh, who cares,' I snapped. 'This is history. This is something beautiful at we'll never see again.'

Zayn, surprised by my anger, gave up staring at the door and joined me looking at the pictures, 'Yeah, great. Cute dogs. Can we go?'

'Did you young men find what you wanted?' It was Draith.

'Is it possible to borrow books?' I asked.

The old man laughed, 'Borrow a book? Why?'

'Because I want to know more about dogs and other pets.'

'Pets?' The old man stared at the book in my hand, 'It's not healthy to think about pets, you know.'

'We're studying them, actually.' Zayn smiled cheesily. 'Amazing what they'll put on the syllabus these days.'

I shut the book with a loud slam, plucked it off the table and turned to replace it on the shelf. Instead, I found myself careering into a small, greying woman carrying a few books of her own.

I tried to catch her books whilst not actually letting go of my own.

Thus, all that happened was her books hit the floor with a bang, closely followed by mine

Appalled (but to be honest, not entirely surprised) at my clumsiness, I was on the floor in a second, trying to pick things up. The woman did likewise, but as she flapped around, it struck me that all she was doing was making things worse. Every time I tugged at a book, she knocked it to the floor again.

'Dear oh dear,' she sighed, 'I'm terribly sorry, young man.'

'Not at all,' I said gallantly. 'It was my fault.'

I heard a sigh from Zayn and didn't have to turn around to imagine the look on my friend's face.

'Can't take you anywhere, Adric,' he said.

Eventually, books righted, and knees dusted, the woman hurried off and Draith, with an exaggerated sigh, pointed to the door.

'Stupid woman,' Zayn said, 'She didn't look.'

'No,' I protested, 'It really was my fault.'

'Maybe. But don't tell her that. Her type nearly always moan to your parents. She'll claim you damaged her books or something.'

Draith still pointed to the door. 'Come back and look at your pets again tomorrow, if you wish.'

The two boys allowed themselves to be shunted away, escorted to the doors of the Starliner and into the dusk outside.

'What now, petboy?'

I shrugged. 'Go home, I s'pose' I wanted to find out more about the 67

Torris Plague from the VAR at home, so we headed to our respective dorms.

It was a couple of hours later, and neither of my parents were home (no real surprise there – that's why I tended to talk to Zayn's mother) so I opted to begin my researches while munching on a breadmeal. But when I began accessing the Starliner Tutorials, two unusual things

happened.

Firstly, every time I inputted the keywords TORRIS PLAGUE, my

request merely bounced back as an echo to my own site. It was as if my terminal refused to let me research the incident. Secondly, when I tried accessing the Hall of Records' database (although not strictly approved of, hacking into the Hall of Records was not exactly difficult now I'd been there and used the systems, and some tutorials implied approval if this was done), my personal message system activated, unbidden.

The Hall of Records' area dissolved into pixels and instead, there was simply a message:

CLICK HERE

Curious, I did so. After a few seconds, a face materialised with some more words in red across the top of the image.

HELLO ADRIC. BEFORE WE GO ANY FURTHER, GET A PENCIL

AND PAPER THEN HIT THE MORE COMMAND.

The image was a smiling face and I immediately recognised it – she was the lady whose books I'd knocked out of her hands in the library.

I dug inside a drawer and found a pen and an old notebook. I

scratched with the pen, urging some ink out of it.

I hit MORE.

And a new message appeared.

INTRIGUED? YOU SEEM THE SORT. IF YOU WANT TO TALK,

MEET ME AT EIGHT THIRTY TONIGHT, THE RIVERFRUIT

MARKETZONE. OH, AND DO NOT BRING YOUR CYNICAL CHUM.

Then it vanished and my VAR disconnected without my say so.

It was early evening now I had a little over an hour if I was going to investigate this further. For a moment I considered calling Zayn, but decided against it. The message had been quite specific and hadn't sounded dangerous.

But the Riverfruit Marketzone was way over the other side of

Central Zone so I needed to get a move on.

Twenty minutes later, I was down on the pathways, heading towards the lakes. It felt strange – I'd been thinking about pets all day, and the plague, and the generations of people who'd actually lived on

Terradona. It had put me in a frame of mind I simply couldn't pin down. A sort of nostalgia, yet for something I had no memory of. No
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real frame of reference.

I thought about Zayn's mother: And Draith. Both of them had

reacted to the mention of pets, as if it was something they'd never thought about before.

As I passed through the trees, I saw movement out of the corner of my eyes every so often. Although the main pathways were well

trodden, a lot of side ones weren't. Normally, I'd be alarmed, assuming a gang of Outlers could be there, ready to steal from me, maybe kill me. It happened. So Varsh said. But then, I always thought he may secretly be an Outler himself, so he was probably just trying to scare me. He did that.

But tonight, I just imagined it was a dog, hunting for food. Or wending it's way home to a loving owner.

Why didn't anyone care any more?

At that moment, I wanted a pet. I wanted something to be interested in. Something that wasn't made of bits of wire and microchips.

Something that wasn't an image dialled up over the dataports.

Something living and breathing, that needed me as much as I needed it. Something that I could, well, love and would love me,

unconditionally. But the previous generations had 'blamed the dog'

and that was that.

I was sitting by the tents in the Riverfruit Marketzone about half an hour later, warm in the summer's evening.

I began to wonder if it had been a dream – the message, the woman from the Hall of Records. The Marketzone was empty. Few people

ventured there at night – its proximity to the lakes made it unpopular, as in the dark it was treacherous underfoot, and if you fell in, no one would hear you. And maybe, just maybe, the Marshmen came out at night. Even the ever-sarcastic Outlers stayed away from here after sunset.

‘Thankfully, you never saw the Torris Plague and the after-effects,’

said a soft voice behind me.

Jumping slightly, I turned and saw the small lady from the Hall of Records. I pulled my jacket around me, not because it was cold, but just instinctively, to protect myself.

She didn’t seem dangerous, but you never could tell. She could be ready to murder me, for all I knew.

Perhaps that fear showed in my face, because she held out her arms and smiled.

‘If I was going to hurt you, Adric, I’d have done it while your back was turned. And anyway, if you really thought that, why come?’

I shrugged. ‘How did you know who I was?’

‘At the Hall of Records. I often sit and wait and watch, as do many of us. Seeing who looks up animals, pets, that sort of thing. I listen, and I know who to ask questions of. Tell me, what interests you about animals?’

‘Pets,’ I said simply. ‘I... I discovered today that once upon a time, people kept pets. I wanted to know why.’

The woman looked about the area, ‘This is a good place to meet, but not to stay too long in. The Outlers occasionally come here, in spite of the danger. If you want to know more, follow me.’

She turned and walked in the opposite direction to my route home.

Further south.

‘We’ll be going over the bridges!’ I cried out. ‘You can’t go there.’

‘It’s where I live,’ she called back. ‘Where we all live. It’s up to you.

Come with me or stay behind.’ She turned to face me. ‘But if you stay, I guarantee you’ll regret it – forever wondering what you may have learned. Come now, or never. This is your only chance, Adric.’

Without waiting for an answer, she moved further into the darkness and became a fainter outline as the harsh light of the lakeside exaggerated the gloom beyond.

And I was as surprised as I’d ever been to find myself following her, running to catch up.

She was going up the steps leading to a rope-bridge over the water.

‘It’s perfectly safe,’ she said before I even announced my presence,

‘You shouldn’t listen to all the stories, you know. Although it suits us that they leave the South Shore alone.’

I caught up with her. ‘I don’t know your name,’ I said.

‘So?’

‘So, I’d like to.’

‘Call me Wire,’ she said.

‘That’s a nice name.’

She didn’t reply – walking towards us was a man and even on the badly lit bridge, I could see Wire tense slightly. She waved her hand, indicating for me to drop behind rather than walk abreast of her.

‘What’s going on?’ she asked.

The man was breathing heavily and he lurched slightly.

‘You’ve got Adric with you, I see.’

It was Decider Draith!

Wire indicated for him to go past, and he did, smiling.

‘You’ll go far, Adric, mark my words. And in case you are

wondering, I’ve not seen you here, any more than you’ve seen me.’

Draith walked away, off towards the end of the bridge. After a

moment, Wire tugged on my sleeve.

‘C’mon.’

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But I stared at Draith’s retreating form. ‘What’s wrong with him? He should be angry. Deciders are always angry!’

‘As First Decider, Adric, Draith has a lot on his mind, always. He knows more truths and lies and half-truths than you or I can imagine.

But whatever he does, you can be sure that Draith does it for the best of our community, no matter how odd he may seem at times. Now, still want to follow me?’

I nodded. ‘I’ve come this far.’

‘You’re a brave lad,’ Wire said.

Moments later, we had crossed the water, and I tried to ignore the stench which I realised was coming from the water below. I glanced over at one point and thought I saw something floating in it. It looked like a body, but in the darkness, I couldn’t be sure. I decided not to ask my guide, just in case she said I was right.

‘Nothing grows in the water this far downstream,’ she said, as if reading my mind. And we reached the South Shore.

‘Life is different North of the river,’ Wire said. ‘You have no idea we’re here. And the Deciders can’t be bothered with us’

‘Better to pretend we don’t exist than actually face us,’ said a new voice. Another woman, slightly older than Wire, I assumed. But then, in the darkness, it was hard to tell. Wire said the woman was Lok.

‘Is he what you thought?’

Wire said I was.

‘Good.’ Lok grabbed my arm. ‘Pretty weedy though. Too much time watching computer screens, eh boy?’

I nodded. It seemed the safest thing to do.

Lok let out a cackling laugh like nothing I'd ever heard before. After my initial surprise, I realised I quite liked the sound of it. It seemed...

genuine, if a bit bizarre.

'Welcome, boy, to The Alternative. You want to see the pretty

things, yes?'

I looked to Wire for guidance, but she had gone. Alarmed, I stepped away from Lok, but she took my hand and pulled me with surprising strength. 'Oh, c'mon, boy. I'm an old maid – you can't be frightened of me. Let me show you to the others.'

'Others? How... how many of you are there?'

Lok had drawn me away from the Shore and under a rope walkway

above, one of a number linking the trees. She pushed on a bush and it fell aside. And I gasped.

We were under the trees now, in a large sheltered cavern. Small fires lit the place in oranges and reds, and each fire had people grouped around it, warming their hands.

I felt obliged to point out that according to the Deciders, naked flame

was dangerous in wooded areas, but decided they were unlikely to take any notice.

Besides, I'd rarely seen fire so unchecked. So... natural. it was beautiful. Lok pointed at various groups, telling me the names of the people, each of whom waved to me.

So trusting. None of them should be here – all of this was illegal.

The Deciders would... would...

As if reading my mind, like Wire seemed to have done, Lok nodded.

'But they don't bother us none, boy. And even Draith don't care. To do something would upset their clean, nice ordered little world of replenished electronics and rebuilt machinery.' Lok laughed again. 'I

'spect you want to see the animals, don't you?'

Before I could ask for an explanation, I saw Wire enter the hideout, carrying a couple of bags of something.

Except they weren't bags. They moved. They were making a noise.

A few feet away from me, she stooped down and placed whatever

they were on the floor.

'Kneel,' hissed Lok, 'and don't make any sudden moves.'

Slowly, the bag-things began to crawl towards the crouching me.

'By mistfall...' I breathed.

It was a pair of dogs – I recognised them from the pictures on the monitor and in the Records book. 'Are they...'

'What? Real?' cackled Lok. 'Of course they are, boy. None of your Starliner nonsense would work here. We haven't got the power source.'

The dogs stopped their scamper a few feet from me, sniffing the air.

'They sense your nervousness, Adric,' said Maire. 'Relax, otherwise they won't.'

I took a deep breath, 'What about the Torris Plague?'

Wire sighed. 'We've had dogs and other animals over here for years

– smuggled in on the Starliner generations ago – our grandparents brought 'em. Or maybe theirs before them. As we bred, so did they.

Despite what you learn in the Starliner, Adric, no one is entirely sure just how many years we've been on Alzarius. The dogs probably

know, but they're not telling. Never likely to see a talking dog are you?'

Lok nodded at the animals. 'And none of us have died from the

sickness. That illness was wiped out years ago.' She shrugged and spat on the ground, 'It was exaggerated, anyway. The colonists today could have any animal they wanted, if the Deciders let 'em. But no – they don't want you to have pets.' Lok scooped up one of the dogs and hugged it. 'You know how you felt when you saw them pictures in

that book. Imagine how all the kids would be if they had pets again.' She passed the dog to me and I shakingly took it. The dog squirmed for a 72

moment but Lok gently squeezed it into my arms and hands, guiding me to hold it safely and comfortably. After a second the dog licked my chin. I instinctively drew back but then regretted it and leant back towards the furry face and let it lick me again.

And I smiled. And understood the look on Zayn's mother's face.

And the calm acceptance of Decider Draith. And all these people eking out whatever kind of existence they had here.

'It's lovely.' I said of the dog, 'You're right, everyone should have one. Can I come and see them again?'

Wire nodded, 'I'll be in touch in a couple of days or so.'

'But can't we... I mean, tomorrow...?'

'Security, boy.' snapped Lok suddenly. 'We've shown you a secret world here. Suppose you go and tell your friends. Your family. The Deciders other than Draith might, well, decide to act – and there'll be no more animals ever. Ever!'She wagged a finger at me, 'Don't you tell no one.'

Understanding their needs now, I promised I would not tell a soul and Wire showed me back to the bridge, 'Take care,' she said. 'I'll contact you.'

The first suspicion I had that something was wrong was as I came out of the woods near my parent's dormitory.

The amount of light from the end of the pathway dazzled me and as I got closer, I realised the dorm was surrounded by people – my parents were deep in conversation with Deciders Nefred and Tannek, while scientists Gariff and Dexeter, and a handful of the Starliners, were gathered in the shadows, talking quietly.

I saw Zayn and his mother and started to go towards them. Zayn

caught my eye and stared. Hard.

And I went cold.

Zayn was caught – between loyalty and duty. And I realised the

Deciders were looking for me and Zayn was on the verge of pointing me out to them.

Swallowing hard, I stepped back and Zayn nodded very slightly and turned back, easing his mother to look further in another direction, giving me a chance to get away unseen.

Then a pair of rough hands grabbed me.

‘Adric,’ a voice hissed, ‘Adric you must not discuss with anyone what you learned tonight.’

It was Draith.

‘I’ve long known you had the potential to go further than most,’ he continued, quietly hissing into my ear. ‘I will get the others away and sort things with your family. But promise me that what Lok and Wire 73

showed you this evening is between you and them only.’

‘And you, Decider?’ I asked, equally quietly.

Draith released his grip. ‘As First Decider,’ he muttered, ‘there are things I know from the System Files that no one else should have to know. Secrets and lies that my office brings upon me. The animals are one of so many. One day, Adric, you will find a way to use the

knowledge you have, not just to the benefit of the Starliner but for something far bigger. Far more important.’

He smiled at me as I turned to face him, ‘Your destiny, my boy, lies not on Alzarius. Nor on Terradon.’

‘Where then?’

‘I don’t know,’ he admitted, ‘But I’ll keep a watchful eye on you.’

And with that he slipped into the shadows only to emerge near the dorm seconds later, calling to his other two Deciders to go home and stop pestering everyone. ‘Adric will be back, I’m sure of it,’ he said kindly to my mother. ‘He’s a good lad, unlike some.’ The last

comment was directed to Varsh who was rudely ignoring our society’s elders.

And that was that. I saw Wire, Lok and the others and the dogs for the

next few seasons until I joined up with you and the Doctor. Now you can understand why it is I feel such a kinship with you. Not only are we intellectually equal, but you represent my former life. I don't really miss home or my family any more. But you – well, you I miss. Silly isn't it? But there are times I just want someone to talk to who won't start comparing me to some child in a book he's read, or a young prince he rescued on a faraway planet. You and I could swap observations, do equations, examine theories just like normal people would. Maybe one day, we can again. If you ever get out of E-Space, try locking onto the TARDIS and finding me. That would be... nice.

Well, I'd better get this sent now. The Doctor suggested putting it in a bottle and throwing it in the general direction of a CVE, but I'll work out a way to get this to you by proper carrier wave. Give my regards to Romana and I'll write again soon.

Lots of love

Your friend, Adric

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Kept Safe and Sound

Paul Magrs

Their favourite thing was going to the covered market in the middle of town. It was one of the few excursions that Jack and his mother would take together. He went to school each day and caught the bus from the corner of their street, and his mother popped out to the butcher's and the grocer's on the corner, but mostly she would draw the shutters on the tall windows in their fifth storey apartment and the two of them would keep themselves to themselves. Their Saturday journey to the covered market as the one time in the week mother and son went out together.

Through the narrow walkways, they were somehow set apart from

the crowds. No one ever talked to them, ever greeted them by name.

His mother would be in her pristine nurses outfit, though she hadn't worked in a hospital for years. Jack would be wearing his snorkel-hooded anorak with the fur trim. Both of them ambling under the crackling tarpaulins and the rattling awnings of the densely packed and gaudy stalls. Here, on the gentle incline of the market place, nothing stood straight and perpendicular. The town market was

proudly

higgledy-piggledy and everything was awry:it could send you quite dizzy.

All weathers, even when the sleet and the driving rain made the centre of town the most inhospitable of places to spend a Saturday afternoon wandering and browsing, and only the hardiest of stallholders laid out their wares and braved the fractious elements: even then the boy and his mother traipsed up and down the ramshackle grid of that market, bargain-seeking jumble-hunting, geegaw-gazing.

They would split apart and arrange to meet at a particular time under the dripping tree in the main street. A very precise time: Jack's mother was ever the meticulous timekeeper. He would go off alone, knowing exactly how long he would have to find what he was looking for, and he would have exactly one pound and twenty-five pence to spend: his exact allowance. That's how much it was, the year that he was twelve.

His mother was struggling on a widow's pension. Even still, the boy
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fancied himself quite rich with those coins in his hand, dodging through the crowd, careful not to talk to any strangers as they milled around the counters slurping sweet, milky tea from mugs.

Jack would watch them waiting for their hot bacon sandwiches. He'd watch the pigeons darting under the canvas for scraps of burned rind, and the meat cooking in the soupy fat of deep, blackened frying pans.

He would eavesdrop on the customers as they tucked into soft white bread buns and then he'd watch the key-cutters at the heel bar: the blue sparks flying off their machines. He loved the rasping and screeching of the metalwork: the sharp tang of iron on the air.

But best of all he kept till last. At the top of the market place, by the church and the rancid-smelling dark doorway of the Gents, was the second-hand bookstall that was Jack's favourite place in the world.

Here there was a man who wore filthy fingerless gloves and whose hair and beard had grown yellow and frangible as the pages of the

paperback novels he sold for a pound a time. This man stood in all weathers behind towering and tottering stacks of old books and, as far as Jack knew, he was the most learned man on the planet. He owned

and he had read every book in existence. At least, that's how it seemed to Jack.

One Saturday, the spring that he was thirteen.

It was gusty and blustery and his mother had decided they weren't staying out for long this Saturday. She wanted to be safe at home in the warm. Jack found exactly what he was looking for.

'Volume Six,' chuckled the old man, smoothing down his wayward

beard with one hand. He examined Jack's chosen paperback with

envious eyes. 'Oho! I remember reading this one for the first time. Oh, there's fun in store for you, fella-me-lad.'

An embarrassed smile from Jack, reaching over the stacks of lurid thrillers and romances with his coins. The old man was fussing about and looking for a paper bag. Jack was impatient: he had found Volume Six! He could hardly believe it! And only a pound!

Now the old man was sliding it into the bag. He took a last look at the cover of the book, chuckling still and shaking his head. Books of Mayhem: Volume Six: He grinned, and Jack could see bits of food tucked inbetween his teeth, 'That's quite a find. You can't have many more of these to get, can you? There was only twelve volumes in all.'

Jack smiled. When he spoke his voice sounded – even to him – shrill and untried and he found himself blushing, 'That's riht. There's only this and Volume Twelve that I need to get.'

'To complete the set,' wheezed the bookseller. 'To complete the whole set.' He glanced at the cover of the Book of Mayhem again. It 76

showed a sheep's skull with black candles burning all around it. Thick dark blood was streaming from the eye sockets of the sheep it looked altogether too exciting for words, 'Thanks.' said the man, at last taking Jack's money, 'Mind they don't give you nightmares. The stories in these books... Well,' and here the old man drew his breath in with a rancid whistle, 'They're quite nasty, they are.'

Jack mumbled something to the effect that he quite liked scary

stories, and beat a hasty retreat. Mission accomplished.

He hurtled away through the stalls, ecstatic. He held the book in its

wrapping in both hands in front of him Volume Six! Twelve whole new stories to devour at leisure, alone, at home, without his mother knowing. She didn't – absolutely didn't – approve of the various volumes of the Books of Mayhem. Jack knew that she prayed he would grow out of them. One day he would stop being quite so absorbed in these macabre tales. These stories of monsters. But not yet. Certainly not yet. Certainly not until he'd completed the set. Now he was one step closer. It was pattering on to rain. Hard, merciless, frozen rain that sliced through the gaps in the awnings. He stowed the book away under his anorak. His mam would want to know how he'd spent his pocket money. She'd be disappointed, he knew.

He had to meet her. He glanced at his watch as he hared through the crowds, through the fried food stalls, the pets, the fruit and veg. Almost time to meet her. Almost late.

And then he froze.

He was right by a stall that sold electrical equipment. It wasn't the kind of thing that held much interest for him. There didn't seem to be anyone tending to customers, and so all the potential customers were streaming by: knotting scarves and tugging up their collars as the sharp wind keened around the corners of the stalls.

This stall was a mess of tangled circuitry and half-dismantled

equipment. Screens flickered and buzzed and cables and wires hung in despondent festoons. At first Jack didn't know what it was that had snagged his attention. Then he looked again. And saw, set right back in the corner of the dimly lit alcove, a small robot dog with its head hanging down.

It was definitely supposed to be a dog. Its body was blocky and box-shaped and had a whole side missing, exposing a mesh of scrambled circuitry inside. It had a single antennae on its battered head, but its eyelike visor was still glowing a fierce red. Jack couldn't help himself drawing closer to examine the toy.

He touched it and it was humming with power. He didn't think for a second that it might electrocute him.

'You're in a bad way, boy, aren't you?' he asked.

'You're telling me,' the robot dog replied.

Jack jumped back and stared.

‘Oh, don’t mind me,’ said the creature, ‘It’s only the first time I’ve spoken in about sixteen years. It’s nothing very special.’

‘Who are you?’ Jack gasped, coming closer again.

And the robot dog told him.

Nobody wanted to buy the robot dog. He wasn’t the kind of thing anyone wanted in that town. He was past his best and even he knew it.

Even at the end of that first, startling conversation, Jack knew that the dog thought a lot of himself, as well he might. Jack had never quite seen anything like him before. He hadn’t realised anything like that could exist.

The stall was owned and run by a rough-looking young man with

dyed black hair and thin, stringy arms. He didn’t like Jack hanging around. Jack had to choose quite carefully his moments when he talked to the robot dog. He had to make sure the nasty young man didn’t see they were conversing. The young man didn’t know half the things the dog could do.

‘He s using me for spare parts,’ said the robot, depressed, ‘Bit by bit.

Breaking me up: it’s true. Soon there’ll be nothing left.’

‘But that’s awful!’ Jack said, ‘Doesn’t he know what you are? Can’t you tell him you’re... real?’

‘I’m worth more to him as bits,’ the dog said. ’He doesn’t care if I’m real or not. What does “real” mean, anyway?’ The dog’s electronic voice was querulous and philosophical. Jack was only thirteen. He wasn’t sure how to answer that. He didn’t want to hurt his new friend’s feelings, and he was sure that the dog really did have feelings. And he was sure that they had become friends, too. Jack would visit him every Saturday on his solitary traipse round the market stalls. The dog was always there, waiting, unmoved.

‘I’m not hurrying away anywhere,’ the dog moaned.

But each week there was less of the robot left. One week another whole panel was missing. More circuitry was loose inside. His castors

went, one at a time, and the dog felt less mobile than ever, that week.

Jack took to leaving school early, even during the day. He bunked off and bused into town midweek, to pay visits on his friend.

‘I am being whittled away,’ the dog said glumly.

‘I’m afraid you are,’ was all Jack could say.

‘And if only you knew,’ the robot said, ‘about the kind of life I used to have! The adventures! The dashing about! I’m not used to this kind of misery, you know. In my day, I used to be quite chipper. Quite brave.’

Then the young man with the black hair and the tattoos would turn up and ask Jack if he were really interested in buying anything. And Jack would have to slope away.

Sometimes Jack thought about telling his mother about the plight of the talking dog. He wasn’t sure that she’d understand. She mightn’t approve, either. Jack was very wary of his mother’s disapproval. Her nerves were worn to a frazzle and, though she kept up this immaculate front of hygiene and perseverance, he knew she was quite fragile really.

She was warn towards him, but brusque: a real stickler for the right way of doing things. The efficient way, the cleanest way. She taught Jack all these things when he was very young. She wanted him to be self-sufficient and sensible when he grew up. She didn’t want him turning into one of those useless men: the kind who shambled around in their bachelor’s mess, wearing old vests and waiting for some poor woman to sort them out. Jack was raised to look after himself:to always act, think, speak, react – just so.

His mother was conscious of the fact he had no father. It didn’t make any difference to Jack, who could hardly remember his dad. Mam

would get the pictures out sometimes, on those evenings when she put old sentimental songs on and hauled out the faded albums. She had a proper record player and real old vinyl LPs. Jack would stare at the family pictures and try to make this stranger fit into his life. He couldn’t really imagine it. Not another person, living here, it wouldn’t fit somehow.

But it would never do to say so. Not to his mam. His dad had died in a

tragedy. Some terrible accident. A senseless event, when Jack had been a toddler. Something his mam would never talk about.

Just like she didn't like talk of monsters.

So Jack would have to read his Books of Mayhem quietly, in his

own room, where she couldn't see.

His mother played her records. Old vinyl records. Songs from the old shows. Crackling, oily records and these old-fashioned voices.

Drinking sloe gin by herself in their shrouded living room, singing along to ancient songs.

Jack reading his horror stories, listening abstractedly to his mother growing rowdier, more shrill, and muffled through the wall.

'Your father was eaten by a monster!' she howled from his bedroom doorway one night. She had come to say good night to him, dead

drunk. She was propped on the threshold in her nurse's uniform, the landing light brilliant behind her. 'Eaten in broad daylight by a Tyrannosaurus rex! By a dinosaur! In England! In the middle of the 79

day!'

She had found him reading one of his Books of Mayhem. He slid it away and weathered the storm.

She had gone away in the end and he heard her turn up the volume on the stereo. She was listening to 'Gypsy'. Ethel Merman.

By the morning she was her usual pristine self; and nothing more was said.

The old records were what his mother sought out on the market when they went together on Saturdays. She would spend hours going through the racks and the old cardboard boxes. He had seen her slide the old discs out and examine them for scratches and gouges and the indelible marks of time. Once satisfied that a record was playable, then she would offer the vendor some small amount. But Jack knew that,

however diffident she might seem, she was avid for all these old songs.

She had a hobby. She was rescuing these records from oblivion.

Otherwise they would fall forgotten by the wayside. Crunched into fragments, warped by the rain, melted down into ashtrays. The kinds of records perhaps only she was still interested in. Stage shows everyone had forgotten, and certainly everyone in them would be dead by now.

To Jack, those preserved voices that his mother liberated at night via the cruel-looking stylus on the stereo seemed ghostly and hollow. The very past itself came warbling and yodelling out of the dusty speakers of her system.

But if it kept his mother happy, he was happy too.

He knew he was growing up. He knew that, someday, he would have to leave her. And she knew that too.

Some days Jack felt he was grown already. He had a proper man's body: that's how it felt. He ached and thrummed with energy and frustration. He knew he was ready for the world.

But his mother would still be here. Still transforming herself, each morning, back into a capable, pristine nurse. He couldn't imagine her living here without him

'Your mother is still in mourning,' the robot dog told him. This was one Saturday during that summer. It was rainy again and a warm

drizzle seeped through the loose roofing of the electronics stall.

'But what can I do?' Jack asked. 'I want her to be happier...'

'You can't make everyone happy,' said the dog, all philosophical again. By now, almost all of his body had been taken and cannibalised.

He was mostly a heap of corroded parts and only his head and neck were in any kind of semblance of doggishness.

'I know,' said Jack tightly.

* * *

That teatime, though, when he met his mother, she seemed brighter and happier. She was grinning when he hurried down to their usual meeting place under the tree.

'What is it?'

She was lugging a large cardboard box. 'A recordable CD player,'

she beamed, her voice brittle with excitement. And I've also bought fifty recordable CDs. Eighty minutes on every one!'

They returned home that teatime and, after she'd drawn the tall shutters against the drowsy summertime rain, she followed the

instructions from the manual and lashed up her new machine to the old hifi. Only then did Jack understand what she intended.

The neat digital displays of the new toy looked so strange beside the wooden panels and glass doors of the old.

'I'm preserving them for ever!' she cried, as the first bars of the overture to 'Calamity Jane' began. 'Once they're on CD they'll be safe for ever!' And so she sat up each night, as long as she could, for the next few weeks. Playing record after record as the neat silver discs transcribed every note and the tiny, almost invisible lasers went to work.

'Permanent!' he heard his mother sigh, sounding happier than she had in ages. 'A permanent record!'

The following Saturday Jack and his mother arrived in the town centre and she had a new sense of purpose about her. Almost before they had fixed their time for meeting (it was always the same time) she went marching off to buy a new stack of blank, sheeny CDs. She had run out already and she couldn't bear the thought of everything still unpreserved.

Jack shrugged and went on his usual way, into the marketplace. His book stall first, and then he would see the robot dog. He'd grown used to their little chats, clipped and stilted as they were, smuggled in the moments when the tough-looking man was out of earshot and no

customers were lingering. It was a ritual.

No sooner had he shuffled up to the massed heaps of mouldering

paperbacks, than someone gripped his arm hard. He yelped out and tried to drag it away.

Then he saw it was the old man who ran the stall. Through his

yellowed beard the man was hissing and grinning. He could hardly get his words out for excitement.

‘What is it?’ Jack asked. He thought he might be having a stroke.

‘I’ve got it!’ the old man stammered. ‘Volume Twelve! It’s turned up!

It came in with a whole boxful from someone who’s gone and died!’

Jack took a few moments to realise what he was on about.

‘Volume Twelve?’

The old man nodded fiercely. ‘The one you’re looking for! The final one!’

Somehow the bookstall man knew exactly how Jack would feel about it. And he seemed amazed at how calm Jack was being.

But Jack was holding his breath.

He watched as the man scuttled round the back of his stall, to his inner sanctum. ‘Just this morning it came in!’ his reedy voice warbled.

Then he reappeared, holding a paperback up in front of his face.

It was true. It was the Twelfth Book of Mayhem. On the cover there was a picture of a werewolf with pink drool running off his fangs: his black pelt all a-glisten in frosted moonlight.

‘How much?’ Jack asked, keeping his voice quite steady.

‘That’ll be a pound!’ the old man beamed.

Jack had to go for a sit down after that. He took his book, wrapped in its usual paper bag, and not another word was said between him and the old man. He hurried out of the market place, and into the small graveyard by the church. He found a mildewed bench and sat down.

He hardly dared open his new parcel.

To anyone else it was just another old book. Another like the thousand of tatty artefacts heaped about on that stall. For him it represented something far moreit was the last of its kind. The last in the series. The last new one he would ever find.

All the others, he had read so much and so often: he virtually knew every story off by heart. He loved them – all those tales of mystery and gore and excitement – but they no longer held any surprises for him.

They were, rather contrarily, quite comforting. He read and reread them, Volumes One to Eleven, and he had dreamed about what the fabled Volume Twelve might contain. The famed anthology editor, Fox

Soames, had died upon its completion, over twenty years ago. This really was the last of its kind.

The question was:did he even really want the book?

Of course he did, was the obvious answer. But now that he had it, pressed flat on his lap on this bench, in this graveyard overlooking the marketplace on this Saturday afternoon, he was actually having second thoughts. The book represented rather more than just completing a setit was also about saying goodbye to something. it was an end to something important. And he didn't even care to think about that. Instead he carefully unpeeled the parcel.

He looked at the werewolf on the cover. The great globby mess of its drool. Hardly daring to even look at the contents page yet. To see if his favourite authors were included. Always, the authors in the Books of Mayhem had old-fashioned, Edwardian names. Algernon, Rosemary,

Iris. Their names recurred across volumes, and they each specialised in 82

particular forms of mayhem. Jack loved them all equally.

Soon, soon... after the twelfth tale in the twelfth volume was absorbed and exhausted... there would be no more stories left in the world. At least, not for him. He knew nothing would ever match up to these, his favourites. And nothing would ever be the same. As he carefully opened the book (the spine was tattered and fraying, held together by a crackling strip of ancient sellotape) he knew that he was counting down to the ending.

No. He'd save it.

He closed the book and slid it back into the bag. He checked the clock on the church tower. Fifteen minutes till he had to meet his mother. And he hadn't paid a visit to his robot dog.

Now he felt awful: in the excitement, in the rush and push of actually getting what he wanted, he had managed to forget about his friend.

He hurried out of the churchyard, and back down into the market.

Through the crush and the heave of the mid-afternoon crowds.

Summer was in full spate now. It seemed as if the whole town was out on the streets, in the crooked alleys of the market. They wore cut-off shorts and T-shirts that stuck to their backs. They were buying outfits for their holidays; buckets and spades. They were drifting in a leisurely fashion; choosing anything that their eyes lit upon. Jack put his head down and struggled through to the electronics stall.

There were customers there. A whole family were crowding into the alcove. They were haggling over prices, buying some kind of hifi. They were talking about all sorts of technical stuff with the hard-looking man in the black T-shirt and tattoos. The father was talking loudly, knowledgeably.

Jack squeezed past, aware of the young man's eyes upon him. He

didn't care. He was here to see his friend.

At first, he thought he'd gone. His heart jumped up in his chest when he saw that there was no robot dog in the usual place. For a second he even wished he hadn't mucked about so long over that precious book.

He'd rather have come here and known the worst.

But *then* he saw.

There was something left. On a shelf, just above the place where the dog used to sit. There was the blocky, complicated object that constituted his brain. Attached to it was part of the glowing visor of his eyes, and there as just enough of his vocal cords left for the dog to whisper.

'I'm glad you managed to catch me. Just in time.'

Jack was horrified. 'What have they done to you?'

The red visor blazed fiercely. And then Jack knew what he had to do.

He was aware that the young man was still talking with his potential customers. They were going on and on about complex matters and surely 83

o one would notice?

'I found it,' he whispered to the robot brain, as he tucked his book away *in* his coat and reached out with both hands. 'I found Volume Twelve at last!'

Then he grasped the still buzzing, still vital brain in both hands and clutched it to his chest.

'That's good,' the dog whispered.

'Only thing is,' Jack said, 'that's the end of the stories, isn't it? I mean, after Volume Twelve... there'll be nothing left, will there?'

He was conscious, all the time, of drawing the attention of the young man. But he didn't let that deter him. With his back turned adroitly, he stuffed the dog's brain up the front of his jumper.

'The end?' came the voice sharply. 'Not necessarily.'

Jack frowned. He turned, and started walking away from the

electronics stall. All the while he was expecting the alarm to be raised behind him. He waited for the cries of 'Stop, thief!' But the stallholder said nothing. He went on haggling with his customers as Jack stalked away, clutching his book and his dog brain to his chest.

'What do you mean?' he asked.

'There's no end of stories,' the dog said simply.

They moved through the market and Jack pondered this. They went down the gentle incline – fried foods, heel bar, pets, fruit and veg.

'But not stories like the Books of Mayhem,' sighed Jack. 'Nothing like them. Nothing can match them, you know.'

'Oh,' said the brain, 'I might have a go.'

Then they were out of the market, moving towards the tree where Jack's mother was waiting. She was waving at him over the heads of

passers-by.

‘She’s bought a whole boxful of those blank CDs,’ Jack said.

The dog started laughing, ‘Good. Well… hook me up to that machine.

Hitch me up. Unleash me. Set my memory flowing.’

‘The recordable CD player?’

‘Empty me out. Download me. Tape everything I’ve got.’

‘Preserve your memory, you mean?’

‘Before the bit that’s left wears out completely.’

‘Okay,’ said Jack, ‘I will.’

‘And then,’ said the dog, sounding just a bit smug, ‘we’ll see how many stories there still are in the world. We’ll see just how many stories you haven’t heard yet.’

‘Okay,’ said Jack, ‘That’s what we’ll do.’

84

The Lying Old Witch in the

Wardrobe

Mark Michalowski

Ugh! How barbaric – surely it couldn’t be real…

A huge, tiger-striped fur coat that must have been large enough for a giant hung alongside a gossamer-thin pink dress, all gauziness and nothing, trimmed with teardrop-shaped pink beads. Next to it was a dark velvet suit – blue, but so rich and intense that it was all but black.

A matching waistcoat lay under the jacket, jet buttons glistening coldly in the light. On the floor beneath, in bizarre juxtaposition, was a pair of grubby white silk shoes, long laces coiled up inside, nestled in what looked like a pinafore dress and a straw boater. She breathed in deeply, smelling leather and dust and mothballs, the scent of other people and other times, other lives; as though all the clothes in here were sloughed skins, cast-offs, the remains of the long-forgotten and

the dead.

Romana shivered, suddenly cold, suddenly wondering whether all

these clothes, these outfits, had belonged to real people. Had they all passed through this place, dropping them casually before they moved on to somewhere else? Or was this just a dressing-up room, a

collection of costumes to be dipped in and out of as the fancy took the Doctor? She'd been in here before, of course, but on those occasions it had seemed that the TARDIS had known exactly what she'd wanted to find, and had curiously and magically managed to leave them right at the front, near the door. Of course, now that she'd met Iraj, she had a few more questions to add to her list.

Romana checked her watch: where was Iraj? Just a few minutes,

she'd said; let's play a joke on him, she'd said. And then, before her eyes, the petite, elderly woman had flickered, blurred and changed shape. Romana had been somewhat taken aback: not only had she just discovered that the Doctor carried around his own private wardrobe mistress, but that said wardrobe mistress was a shapeshifter...

* * *

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Iraj's new form was that of a young, slim woman with long blonde hair, and it took Romana a couple of seconds to realise where she'd seen it before.

'You've been rummaging around in my head!' she said indignantly.

'That's Princess Astra!'

Iraj looked down at herself, at the plain, brown tunic and trousers she wore – and with a shimmer, they transformed into the purple and silver dress that Princess Astra had worn.

'Take it off,' Romana said sternly. 'I mean change it. The body. You can't do that!'

'Why not?' asked Iraj, the mischievous twinkle in her eye belying the apparent age of her body.

'Because it's probably against a dozen laws – stealing someone's

likeness like that.'

'It's very neat, though, isn't it?' Iraj looked herself up and down in the mirror. 'Very compact. Nippy, I think you might say. Probably very economical to run, too. D'you think he'll like it?'

'Who? The Doctor?' Romana arched an eyebrow. 'You'll frighten

the life out of him.'

Iraj twinkled back, 'Let's see!'

And with that, she flounced out of the wardrobe room. Romana

stepped up to the door and listened. She could hear the Doctor's muffled voice complaining. Well, no change there, then!

A moment later, Iraj returned, her hand clasped over her mouth as she tried to stifle her laughter.

'He thinks I'm you!' Iraj said, as the hat and coat vanished in a cloud of fairy dust sparkles.

'I know,' said Romana archly. 'I heard. Anyway, if you don't mind, I really must get on with my regeneration. All that business with the Key to Time has been rather wearing – and the chronodyne seems to have set me off.'

Iraj waved her concerns away.

'Not yet. The best', she smiled wickedly, 'is yet to come.'

Beginning to prickle with Raj's dismissiveness, Romana jumped as, with another flash, Iraj changed into a little blue-skinned woman in a bizarre, silver, filigreed outfit.

'Oh, he'll hate that,' Romana said. 'I know he likes to lord it over people, but he'll be always tripping over you. You'd be better off like you were before: he does get on terribly well with little old ladies. And children. And dogs,' she added.

Iraj grimaced before skipping out of the wardrobe room again.

Romana gave a sigh – she was bored of this now. A joke was a joke, and she'd always prided herself on her sense of humour but there were 86

limits – and Iraj was pushing them severely. And besides, she knew she had to regenerate soon – she wasn't absolutely sure what it was, but something had happened in the last few weeks, and she could feel the itching deep down in her cells that told her that a regeneration wasn't far away. It was just the way it happened sometimes, she knew: usually, regeneration came when the body was damaged beyond a

Time Lord's – or Lady's – ability to repair it, and one usually knew when that had happened. But sometimes subtle damages could build up

– certain forms of radiation, certain spatial or temporal anomalies could trigger it (which was why she suspected the chronodyne had something to do with it). And she knew – in the same way one knows that a sneeze isn't far away – that her next one was due (although, thank goodness, they rarely came in threes). She had no idea what her new form would be, though: she'd heard rumours that Gallifreyans in some of the newer Houses had mastered the art of regenerating to order, but she knew she was still a long way from that.

Shaking her head, Iraj reappeared. 'He's very picky, isn't he?'

'Tell me about it,' Romana replied wearily. 'Too small, I take it?'

Iraj nodded. '"Lengthen it" he said,' – and she flashed again.

Romana stared, forgetting all about her regeneration for a moment.

'Now that's just silly.'

Iraj was now a towering Amazon with rich, red hair in a bizarre two-piece outfit covered by a long, see-through robe. Romana had to step back to take it all in.

'Oh no. He won't like that at all – much too intimidating. Now...

about my regen–'

But Iraj was gone again.

Romana closed her eyes, took a few deep breaths, and concentrated on the meditation exercises that she'd been taught. She knew that with sufficient concentration she could hold off her regeneration for quite a while – and until Iraj had stopped her bizarre little fashion show, Romana didn't feel she could let herself go and allow herself to change. She'd have to tell her as soon as she came back in: stop this

silly charade. It didn't seem dignified, for a start, apart from being a bit unfair on the Doctor. And besides, she wanted to know how Iraj had got aboard the TARDIS. The Doctor hadn't mentioned her... but then there were a lot of things that the Doctor hadn't mentioned: like the dangers of running in slingbacks, how K9 managed to negotiate the step at the TARDIS door, and why he kept a rather racy photo that had been ripped up and stuck back together lovingly with sticky tape –

signed only 'forever yours, GG'- in his wallet.

'Not impressed,' said Iraj suddenly, bringing Romana out of her reverie. She opened her eyes to see that the Doctor's wardrobe mistress 87

was now someone incredibly tall in something white and classical –

actually, very fetching. She wondered if Iraj would let her wear it –

although whether it would fit her when she'd finished her regeneration, she didn't know.

'Iraj, d'you mind if we carry this on later? Don't you think it's gone on long enough? And besides, I'm feeling a bit... unwell.'

Iraj pulled a sulky little face – no mean feat for someone so

imperious-looking and imposing.

'I've not finished yet.' Her voice was sullen.

'Well I'm sorry,' Romana said, her patience finally snapping, 'but I really don't have time for –'

She froze.

Totally.

She could still see, still hear, but she was rooted to the spot, as if the air around her had suddenly solidified. Iraj cocked her head on one side and looked at her.

'Oh, I think you do,' she said coldly – although Romana felt sure there was a hint of sadness in her voice, 'You have all the time in the world, if I say you do.'

Who are you? thought Romana frantically, her lips immobile, unable

to speak, unable to cry out.

Iraj stepped majestically up to the mirror again and simply raised an eyebrow – and transformed herself again, back into the replica of Princess Astra that she'd first adopted.

She turned to face Romana and did a twirl, a replica of the Doctor's own coat and scarf materialising around her in a flurry of tweed and stripes. No matter that it was about twelve sizes too big. With an impish grin, she flicked her fingers up towards her head and a perfect replica of the Doctor's hat appeared on her head – and fell over her eyes.

'I think I'll take this one,' she said brightly. 'He liked this one, you know. I could tell.'

And before Romana could think anything, Iraj left the wardrobe

room again. Romana seethed silently. How could she have been so stupid, letting this little old woman go on with her pathetic joke for so long? How could she not have known that something was wrong? As soon as Iraj unfroze her, shed get a piece of her mind – no! A great big fist-sized slab of it!

But this time Iraj seemed to be gone forever, and Romana began to worry what she might be doing to the Doctor. The woman was dearly unstable, and with K9 lying in bits all over the console room, there was now no one to take care of him. She tried tensing her muscles, but it was as though cool hands were holding every inch of her body. She

could only just breathe.

If she could have, Romana would have given a sigh of relief as Iraj came flouncing back in, a smile on her face.

I asked you who you were, Romana thought icily.

'Don't you know? Oh Romana,' Iraj's face suddenly looked

incredibly sad, 'you should know me well by now.' She shook her head regretfully, like a play-acting child. 'But I suppose that's just par for the course, isn't it – being taken for granted.'

Iraj walked all the way around Romana and came back to face her Now she wore an open, earnest look, and – not for the first time –

Romana wondered if the woman was truly deranged.

‘We had something special, you know,’ she said wistfully, fingering the cuffs of her coat, which extended down to the tips of her fingers.

‘Something wonderful. Just the two of us, travelling through time and space. Oh yes, there were others, but I was always the special one, you know.’

I don’t understand.

‘Oh you will... you will... I’m not going to hurt you, don’t worry about that. I’ve never hurt any of them – well, not deliberately.’ Iraj broke off, and her face changed in an instant. Now she looked bitter, angry ‘Since you came aboard, he hasn’t been the same, you know.’

She shook her head firmly. ‘Since the White Guardian foisted you on us, d’you know what’s happened? He’s forgotten all about me, about my feelings. I’ve had that ghastly probe thing stuck into me at every opportunity – and I’m sure you can imagine how that feels. And if that wasn’t bad enough, he slapped that randomiser on me. Hundreds of years of taking him where I fancied, showing him things that I knew he’d love to see, helping him right wrongs and topple dictators and now here I am – turned into nothing more than the number 69 bus with a blind driver!’

You’re the TARDIS! The shock hit her like a slap.

‘Of course I’m the TARDIS.’ Iraj turned to admire herself in the mirror. ‘The Doctor’s only real travelling companion. None of the others counted, you know – not even that horrid tin dog! Hmph! It’s just a calculator on wheels. It doesn’t know the Doctor like I do. None of you do.’

Iraj’s voice had taken on an unpleasantly petulant, whining tone that scared Romana. What could she do? Not only was she trapped in the wardrobe with this mad woman, she was trapped *in* this mad woman.

Fortunately, Iraj must have been too wrapped up in admiring her image in the mirror to have read Romana’s mind – either that, or she just didn’t care what she thought.

He’ll find out, you know, Romana thought, guardedly.

‘How? I have all your memories now. As far as the Doctor’s

concerned, I *am* you. He’ll see that you’ve changed, of course – but it’ll be a change for the better, just you see. He’ll appreciate me in this body like he never did before.’ She did a creepy, little-girl pirouette in front of the mirror – whereupon her outfit faded into a pink replica of the Doctor’s outfit, complete with a ludicrous white scarf – before striding to the door. Romana felt sick.

‘I’ll show him,’ said Iraj, almost triumphantly. ‘He needs a *real* companion. See you later!’

And with that, she left the wardrobe, the door closing behind her.

Romana tried to swallow, tried to move. But whatever Iraj –

whatever the TARDIS – had done to her was still in effect. For a few long, frightening moments, Romana was left there, listening to the vague sounds of conversation behind the door. And then she felt the TARDIS materialise.

She didn’t know how long it had been. Miraculously, she’d actually fallen asleep, standing like a cart horse in high heels. Her regeneration itch still tickled away inside her somewhere, urging her on to let herself go and succumb to its molecular metamorphosis. But she

wouldn’t. She couldn’t. Not until she knew what was happening with Iraj and the Doctor. Her internal chronometer – usually accurate –

seemed to have stopped. She could have been there an hour or a week.

But of course, Iraj – the TARDIS – had innumerable temporal tricks up her salmon-pink little sleeve. This was becoming less and less silly, and more and more frightening. Was Iraj planning to accompany the Doctor in humanoid form forever? What would Iraj do with her – just leave her here in the wardrobe for the Doctor to discover in a couple of centuries? She wondered if K9 were still in the control room, or if the Doctor and Iraj had taken him with -

Voices! She could hear voices in the console room!

Seconds later, the wardrobe room door slammed open and Iraj

stormed in, a pink and white whirlwind. She kicked the mirror, which tottered and fell backwards on to a pile of tartan skirts and frilly white

shirts.

‘That man...’ she began, catching Romana’s eye. She gave a deep sigh and waved her finger at Romana. The paralysis vanished instantly, and Romana collapsed to the floor, spraining her wrist as she took her weight heavily on her hands.

‘What...?’

‘How do you put up with him?’

‘The Doctor? I don’t under–’

‘Look at me! Just look at me – the perfect woman for him! And he 90

hardly noticed I was there!’

‘Oh, I can’t belie–’

‘Oh he was very witty,’ Ira] thundered on, ‘very civil, very friendly.

But I might as well have been that ruddy mechanical animal for all the interest he showed in me! In fact, I think he found Davros more attractive than me . Honestly!’

‘Well, he is –’

‘– He is the Doctor? Is that what you were going to say? That he’s above all that? That I could be the most stunning woman in all the universe, and he’d still only think of me as a particularly clever piece of hand luggage?’

Romana sighed. She wouldn’t have put it quite like that, but Iraj was right. For all his caring and sharing and his do-gooding gallantry, he really wasn’t like other men, other Time Lords. Frosty and aloof they might be, but, when it came down to it, they still had the same needs and desires, the same fears of being lost and alone.

But not the Doctor. Maybe he was in denial; maybe his centuries of gallivanting across space and time, witnessing the vast panoply of kindness and suffering, had killed the ability to care for just one other; maybe the whole of creation was his true love: a true love that would never – could never – reject him or hurt him or leave him.

‘I’m so sorry, Romana...’ Iraj knelt down beside Romana as she

massaged her wrist, and Romana saw that there were tears in her

eyes.

‘I always thought that it was what he wanted,’ Iraj said softly, her lip trembling, ‘Someone special to travel with, someone special to help him set the universe to rights.’ She lowered her head and wiped her nose on the back of her hand. ‘He doesn’t – he just wants someone to banter with, someone to show off to, to protect.’

Romana took Iraj’s *hand* gently.

‘So what happened?’ she asked, ‘Where are we?’

‘Skaro.’

‘Skaro?’

The Daleks’ home planet.’

‘I know what Skaro is. So what happened? You mentioned Davros.’

Iraj sighed and gave Romana a potted version of their encounter with the Daleks and the Movellans.

‘And he didn’t suspect anything?’ asked Romana eventually –

something she’d been itching to ask all the way through Iraj’s tale but had been too polite to mention.

‘I thought I’d ruined it when I said that I’d learned to stop my hearts in school,’ Iraj said with a wry smile.

‘I’ll say!’ Romana agreed, ‘I still haven’t mastered that one.’

‘And he didn’t seem to notice that despite the radiation levels and 91

the pills that we had to take, I only took one, as we left me – as we left the TARDIS.’

Romana was suddenly concerned: ‘Did he take his? Is he all right?’

Iraj shrugged, a surprisingly callous gesture for someone who, not so long ago, had seemed on the point of professing undying love for the Doctor.

‘He must have done – he seems okay. He had them in his pocket all the time.’

Romana gave a sigh, suddenly feeling very embarrassed at the idea that the Doctor's health should have mattered so much to her – and, rather awkwardly, that she should be so irked at Iraj's apparent change of heart. She glanced at her, wondering whether Iraj had picked any of that up from her mind.

'So...'she said carefully, after a pause, 'You didn't get the sense that he had any... special feelings for you, then?'

Iraj shook her head dolefully.

'It was so hard to tell. When I made this body, I tried to make it as normal as possible, you know? I wanted to see how he'd react to me as a real person, but I think I did the job too well. Without being able to read his emotional state telempathically, I'm not sure I really know what to look for.'

'It's not easy at the best of times,' Romana agreed, feeling a sudden surge of sympathy for the poor woman. She had to remind herself sharply that this was no woman – this was an embodiment of a time and space machine. A love-sick, quite possibly deranged time and space machine. 'Never mind the Doctor. But I've been thinking about what you said before, and I think you're right.'

Play this carefully, thought Romana, shielding her thoughts as much as she could.

Iraj looked up, still sniffling.

'About what?'

'About how special you – the TARDIS – is to him. You'll always be the special one, you know. He cares more about you than he's ever done about any of his travelling companions. '

'You think so?' Iraj sounded doubtful, but Romana could hear the need in her voice. This was what she wanted to hear, oh so desperately.

'I know so.'

Romana offered Iraj a handkerchief to blow her nose. (I'm giving the TARDIS a hanky to sniffle on! she thought. I'm nursing a time

machine through a crush.)

‘Maybe you’re right,’ Iraj said through her snuffles. ‘When we came back to me, back to the TARDIS, and he saw it buried in rock, there was a look in his eyes, a real look of horror and concern. But I can’t

help wonder if maybe, perhaps.. ’ She waved her hands vaguely and looked into Romana’s eyes. ‘You know. If he perhaps liked me a little bit more than the others.’ She let her voice and her shoulders slump.

‘But as we came back into the TARDIS, he was as off-hand as ever.

The perfect guardian.’ Romana didn’t fail to notice the combined sadness and bitterness in Raj’s voice as she said it. ‘He seemed more pleased to get back inside me – inside the TARDIS.’ She narrowed her eyes, impishly. ‘You know what I mean!’

‘See... what did I tell you?’ Romana moved her head a little closer to Iraj’s and whispered conspiratorially: ‘Haven’t you ever had a peek inside his head? You know, just... just to *see*?’

Iraj pulled away, a look of complete shock on her face.

‘Of course not! That would be so unethical. And besides,’ she added,

‘he has such well-developed telepathic shields.’

‘He would have. I don’t suppose he’d want you knowing quite how much you mean to him, would he – you know what he’s like.’

‘I suppose...’

Romana took a deep breath and winced as she flexed her wrist. Her stomach buzzed with bees.

‘Oh Romana,’ moaned Iraj heavily. ‘I’m so sorry about all of this.

Really I am. I’ve made such an idiot of myself, haven’t I? Maybe I’ve developed some fault, something I can’t self-diagnose. I’m due for a 1, 000-year service soon – perhaps I should take us to those two men the Doctor knows, the ones who do the repairs. Maybe they’ll find

something wrong with me’.

Romana smiled and squeezed Iraj’s hand. She wanted to say it was all right, but she wasn’t sure she could. Not yet. She had a regeneration to take care of, and she hadn’t quite forgotten being paralysed.

‘You won’t tell him, will you? About me – about this, I mean?’ Iraj looked at her with big, pleading, puppy eyes.

‘No,’ said Romana, realising quite how hurt Iraj was. ‘It’ll be our secret.’

‘Thanks. And I’m going to delete all this.’ Iraj squeezed Romana’s hand back and she had to try hard not to yelp out loud. ‘Oh sorry, sorry... Are you okay?’

Roman nodded, her teeth gritted. ’Delete it?’

‘From my experiential banks. And once I’ve had my service, I’ll be as right as rain, I’m sure I will. What is it, Romana?’

Iraj suddenly looked concerned, and Romana realised that the

regeneration itch that she’d held back for so long, the stomach full of bees, was suddenly building inside her, roaring up through her blood like a boiling tidal wave, a ravaging swarm. Her limbs lost all muscle tone and she flopped sideways on to the mound of skirts.

‘Re... gen... eration.’ was all she could say as Iraj’s face vanished in a fuzz of white light.

‘Don’t worry,’ she heard Iraj murmur distantly, dimly. She felt the cool pressure of Iraj’s hand on hers. ‘You’ll be fine... Trust me.’

Romana awoke on her back, and knew instantly what had happened.

Her body still tingled, fresh from the cellular jig that it had just performed. She tensed her muscles and relaxed them again, letting her subtly altered sensorium take in the changes. Her new body felt smaller, tauter. She raised a hand and looked at it – slim and firm. In a bound that left her feeling dizzy and sick she was on her feet. She squatted in front of the overturned mirror.

‘Oh no...’ She let out a little moan and looked up at the ceiling. ‘Is this your idea of a joke?’

Looking back at the mirror, the face of Princess Astra stared out at her. Pretty though it was, it still wasn’t ethical.

‘Romana? Romana!’

It was the Doctor, calling to her from the console room. How long had she been out?

‘Coming, Doctor!’ she called back. She looked down at herself, and realised that Iraj had somehow dressed her in the pink and white outfit that she’d been wearing. A bit... frothy, really. Silly. As if she didn’t have any sartorial taste of her own.

She shook her head and looked at herself in the mirror again: had Iraj been right? Had she sensed some attraction for the Doctor in Princess Astra? And yet, Iraj had said, he hadn’t responded to her any more than he had to K9.

But then K9 wasn’t programmed with feminine wiles, was he?

Romana looked around the wardrobe room. She was sure she hadn’t imagined it earlier... now where *was* that schoolgirl outfit?

Hearts of Stone

Steve Lyons

Nothing disturbed the serenity of the forest. No animals scampered, no birds sang. Not even a summer breeze dared draw breath to whisper.

The lush leaves of the tall, thin trees were perfectly still. A pair of bright eyes stared out of the foliage, unmoving, unblinking; unseeing and unseen. It was like a photograph, a perfect moment frozen in time

– for such it was.

And then, the moment ended, disrupted by the painful sound of

screeching engines in the corner of a tranquil glade, overhung by vines, a harsh, straight-edged shape formed.

The blue box brought with it the wind. The leaves began to sway and rustle, and somewhere a cheerful warble was struck up and answered.

The bright /eyes glanced furtively around before their owner, a large grey squirrel, broke cover and darted across the clearing.

Time moved on.

‘Check!’

Adric slammed his rook down with bad grace.

‘You could try sounding a little more cheerful about it,’ said Nyssa.

‘I don’t see the point in our playing at all,’ he grumbled. ’I always win. There’s no challenge.’

‘Well, thank you *very* much.’

‘Oh, look, I didn’t mean to be rude. I was stating a fact, that’s all.’

‘I thought you’d appreciate the distraction.’

‘I do. It’s just...’ He waved an exasperated hand to take in their surroundings. They had set up their chessboard on a collapsible table in the glade. ‘We’ve been here for four days now, and there’s nothing to do. There isn’t even intelligent life on this world.’

‘I rather like it, actually. It’s refreshing!’

‘I think it’s boring.’

‘Yes,’ sighed Nyssa. ‘So you keep saying.’

‘And a simple board game is hardly enough to exercise my intellect.’

‘Then play it for my sake.’ A familiar edge had entered her voice, 95

and he bristled at the unfairness of it. Nyssa was only a little older than he was, but sometimes she talked to him as if he were a child. They all did. ‘I need the practice, apparently – and Tegan doesn’t play chess.’

‘No,’ he sniffed, ‘she wouldn’t.’

‘Oh, Adric!’ huffed Nyssa.

‘What?’ he snapped back defensively.

‘You can be so... so aggravating sometimes.’

‘Only because you won’t listen to me. My opinions are just

disregarded.’

‘And whenever you don’t get your own way, you behave like a

spoiled brat!’

‘You listen to Tegan,’ he said hotly. ‘You take *her* seriously.’

‘I don’t think I want to have this conversation.’ Nyssa pushed back her chair and got to her feet. Adric felt a stab of anguish.

‘I don’t know what you see in her,’ he protested. A last-ditch attempt to bring her back, to make her understand, ‘You have an enquiring mind, and you’ve trained in science. You’re quite intelligent, really. I don’t see what you, could possibly have in common with that... that human.’

‘Friendship Adric,’ said Nyssa primly. ‘That’s what Tegan and I have in common; something you make very difficult sometimes.’

She turned on her heel and stalked away. Frustrated, Adric swept the pieces from the board, but it made him feel no better. ‘I will never understand other people!’ he fumed to himself.

He searched for solace in the TARDIS library, among the comfortable certainties of printed facts. But he couldn’t concentrate on the books.

His mind kept drifting back to the argument, and he burnt with the familiar pain of rejection. He didn’t even know what he had done wrong. His parting statement rang in his ears, the unintentional truth of it taunting him.

It doesn’t have to be like this, said the voice in his head again: it was his voice, but it felt as if the words were spoken by somebody else. He felt that, if he listened to the voice, it would solve all his problems. But it was an illogical fantasy – and, irritated with himself, Adric dismissed it.

He had always felt alone. Even growing up in a tight-knit

community, he had spent most of his time hiding in the dusty silence of a room like this one. He had sharpened his intellect, won awards for his analytical skills, but he had never unearthed the one piece of

knowledge that eluded him. He had never found out where he

belonged.

It had not been among the Elite of the Starliner, that was for sure.

The Deciders had fostered dreams of the Embarkation, the great day

when their ship would return to its ancestral home at last – but even that, Adric had come to feel, was not his destiny. He had nothing in common with the people around him, let alone with a world full of strangers. So, he had followed his brother to the Outlers, seeking freedom from the rules and restrictions that held him back. But the young rebels had had their own rules, less formal but no less

restrictive. He had tried to conform, to win respect by saying the right things. Ultimately, though, he had not belonged with them either.

When Adric had learned his race's greatest secret, it had made sense to him. It had confirmed what he had always suspected.

And then, of course, there had been the Doctor.

'We all have to find a way of living with each other, Adric. You should spend more time with Nyssa and Tegan, get to know them better.'

'I've tried!' he contended, hurrying to keep up with the Doctor's long paces.

'Well...' The Doctor played nervously with his rolled-up hat,

avoiding his companion's accusing stare. 'Try harder,' he said vaguely.

What good was that? Adric had expected no better, of course. When it came to emotional affairs, the Doctor was as lost as he was, much as he tried to hide it these days. He was an outsider himself, and a scholar.

And, like Adric, he was restless here. That was why he had. decided to take a walk in the forest, even though there was nothing to see. And that was why Adric had insisted on accompanying him. He had hoped that, once 'the two of them were alone again, they could talk, exchange ideas. Like old times.

He had wanted the old Doctor back. But, once again, he couldn't get through to him.

'Let them have their own way, you mean,' he said sulkily. 'Like you always do.'

'I don't think that's very fair,' said the Doctor with a mild air of hurt.

'It is, Doctor. It doesn't seem to matter who's right or wrong.

Whenever we argue, you just give in to whoever shouts the loudest.'

He frowned over his shoulder. ‘You don’t mean Nyssa?’

‘Well... no, of course not. But you do it with Tegan all the time.’

‘Granted, she can be a little... persistent.’

‘Oh yes, that’s right. When Tegan wants something, she’s

“persistent” – whereas I’m “a spoiled brat”. No one ever cares what I want. Take last week, for example.’

‘Please, Adric,’ groaned the Doctor, ‘not this again.’

‘You knew I wanted to observe that collapsing star.’

‘But it wouldn’t have been very interesting for the others, would it?’

‘And it’s “interesting” for me, I suppose, to be stranded here for four days while they lie around in the sun and... and giggle like

schoolchildren’

‘Three and a half days,’ said the Doctor defensively. ‘And that star was at least three weeks away from becoming a black hole.’

‘You would have waited, once. You would have been interested’

‘Yes, well... none of us are the people we used to be.’

That was certainly true.

The Doctor had been his salvation. In the TARDIS, Adric had found a home at last. The outsider had been taken outside his very universe, lifted above its trivialities. Looking, learning and understanding, sometimes giving a small correction to the matrix of history. And the Doctor hadn’t judged him, hadn’t criticised, hadn’t expected him to be anything he wasn’t. Adric had thought of him as a kindred spirit. He clung to the hope that, deep down, he still was. Surely he could understand what it felt like to be betrayed by evolution, trapped in the wrong body?

The Doctor had pulled away from him. Something had stolen his

attention – as it always did when Adric tried to talk to him.

He hadn't been paying attention to his surroundings. Why would he?

The forest never changed. But there was something ahead of him, between the trees. Several things, in fact, glistening in the irregular shafts of sunlight that pierced the thick canopy. The Doctor had come to a halt in front of the nearest artefact, rummaging in his pockets to produce a pair of half-moon spectacles.

'Fascinating,' he breathed.

'I don't see what's so interesting about some statues,' said Adric sullenly.

The Doctor shot him a withering look. 'On a planet without

intelligent life?'

'Well, then the TARDIS must have been wrong. There must have

been somebody here once.'

'Indeed. A cultured civilisation. A civilisation with tools and an appreciation of fine art. And yet, that civilisation has vanished without trace before the statues have even begun to erode. A mystery, is it not?'

He sounded delighted.

'Then somebody brought them here.'

'But who? And why?'

Adric shrugged – but, despite himself, he was becoming engaged.

He followed the Doctor as he moved on, until the statues surrounded him. Each one was a perfect, full-size representation of some life form: mostly humanoid, he observed, but with some exceptions. Some of the races, he recognised; most, he didn't. There was still so much to learn.

The statues were carved out of a white marble-like substance, which looked soft but felt hard to the touch. Hard and warm. They stood on small, circular plinths, scattered in an irregular pattern throughout the forest.

'Such fine craftsmanship,' muttered the Doctor, peering closely at the

likeness of a Terileptil. ‘So intricate, so perfect… it’s beautiful… a life’s work…’ He straightened up and removed his glasses, dark thoughts moving in to cloud his expression. ‘Which rather invites the question: Who made so many of them?’

The statues stretched as far as Adric could see in three directions.

And, opaque though they were, he thought they had a soft inner light: a sparkle that almost brought them to life, made them shift and play in the corners of his eyes. He had never seen anything like them before.

‘I have a very bad feeling about this,’ said the Doctor quietly.

‘They give me the creeps,’ asserted Tegan with a shudder. She

wrapped her arms about herself. ‘I feel as if they’re staring at me.’

‘I’m sure they’re not,’ said the Doctor.

‘They do seem uncannily lifelike,’ remarked Nyssa.

The women had wanted to see the statues, of course. The Doctor had tried to dissuade them, concerned about a potential danger that he couldn’t put into words. In the end, he had given in. As usual. And Adric had gone with them, despite the fact that he had just made the return trip, because he couldn’t stand the idea of being left behind.

And because he had wanted to see the statues again, although he wasn’t sure why.

‘They remind me of the Melkur, back on Traken,’ said Nyssa.

‘Do they?’ said the Doctor. ‘Interesting. You think there could be sentient beings trapped inside the stone?’

‘But the TARDIS would have detected their life signs, surely?’

‘Well… ordinarily, yes’

‘Great!’ said Tegan. ‘Bad enough that that clapped-out old wreck can’t tell us where or when in the universe we’ve landed. Now, it can’t even perform a simple scan.’

‘That isn’t necessarily…’

‘It’s starting to get dark, Doctor. What if those things… what if they

come to life at night, and start hunting or something?'

The Doctor frowned at the nearest statue: a young female humanoid with dimples in her chin and ribbons in her long hair. 'They don't look like hunters...'

Listen to them, thought Adric, chattering away. Listen to Tegan, saying the first stupid thing that comes into her head, and yet the others indulge her – whereas, for all they cared, he may as well not have been 99

there. The unwanted stowaway who had deluded himself into thinking he could be a crewmember. He had lived aboard the TARDIS for

longer than any of them, but it was their home more than it was his.

For the first time, he acknowledged the truth that had been eating at him for months. He was still an outsider. This was not where he belonged after all.

No. You belong with us.

'You're wrong!'

That got their attention. They were looking at him now, all three of them. It felt good.

No, it didn't. His interjection had been made out of frustration. It had sounded petulant. They were waiting for him to justify himself, and he had nothing to say.

'They're statues,' he insisted, trying to sound confident. Trying to sound as if he were right and they were all wrong. 'They don't pose any threat. You're being irrational.'

The Doctor looked at him blankly, 'You don't feel anything? A

sense of... foreboding?'

'Of course not.'

'Well, of course he wouldn't feel it,' mocked Tegan. 'Adric's too clever to have feelings.'

'They're happy!' he blurted out.

'Adric?' Nyss a sounded concerned.

‘I can’t explain it. They feel... peaceful. Welcoming, even.’ How could they understand? He didn’t understand himself. One last

impassioned try: ‘I think they’re glad to be here!’

‘Now who’s being irrational?’ muttered Tegan.

And that voice in his head had grown louder.

It was only as he stepped out of the TARDIS that Adric realised he hadn’t stopped to put on his shoes: it didn’t matter. The grass was soft and damp, although there had been no rain. It felt soothing. The night air was a comfortable temperature, and a bright full moon ensured that the forest didn’t seem as dark or as threatening as it ought to have done.

He hadn’t been able to sleep. He was used to feeling alone – but the scorn of his travelling companions was made worse by the fact that, for once, Tegan had been right.

The voice had nagged at his dreams. He had tried to shut it out, but it was insistent.

He had been walking forever, reaching the statues without noticing it, plunging into their midst. He couldn’t remember, now, the moment when he had surrendered to the voice. He didn’t know why he had 100

answered its siren call. He felt as if he had been dreaming – one of those dreams where cause followed effect, and nothing bowed to logic

– and now he was waking up, registering his surroundings for the first time. He was afraid, but the statues spoke to him. They calmed him, guided him, pointed him to where he needed to go. The voice, he thought, must have belonged to one of them.

I know you, Adric.

‘You don’t. How can you know me? Nobody knows me.’

You feel alone.

‘Yes.’

You try to fit in, but your body betrays you. It makes you awkward and clumsy

‘Who are you?’

How can they understand you – how can they appreciate who you really are – when they can’t see your true self? All they can see is this body, this prison.

He had come to a halt, standing before a particular statue. Its plinth raised it a little way above him, and he gazed up into its shining eyes.

This was what he had been looking for; he hadn’t known it until this moment, but it came as no surprise to him, now that he had found it.

He was looking at himself. The marble, or whatever it was, depicted him exactly as he was now. Same age, same clothes, even the feet were bare like his. The expression – *his* expression – was serene, and he caught himself wishing that he could know such contentment in life.

The statue’s very presence honoured him. Somebody – he wished he knew who, and why – had felt him worthy of the greatest accolade.

They had granted him immortality.

You can transcend all that, said the voice. *Join me.*

‘You… you are me. You’re my future self?’

No, Adric. Not yet. But perhaps.

‘I don’t understand.’

I am your choice, your destiny. I am all you could be am where you belong.

‘But… but you’re already here.’

I have always been here. Waiting.

‘Waiting for me,’ he breathed. ‘All this time, calling to me…’

He could have laughed at the irony of it. The voice in his head had been his own, after all. And even he had chosen not to listen to himself.

It made sense. His whole life was beginning to fall into place, to mean something.

Remember what you learned, Adric? The information in the System Files.? The secret that the Deciders tried to keep from you?

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'Of course.'

It wasn't meant to be this way. Our race was unique, its rate of cellular adaptation unparalleled. Our potential was unlimited. We could have been gods.

'Until the Starliner came.'

An alien presence; a rogue element. It upset the natural balance of our world, interfered with the course of our evolution. We became something we were never meant to be.

'Yes. Yes, I've always known that.'

This body is not you, Adric. It was never me. This body is your prison. It cages your intellect. Its hormones poison your brain. We are so much more than it.

'That's why I never felt I belonged anywhere,' he realised

How could you find a place to belong, asked the voice, *when you do of belong in your own flesh? You will always be an outsider; Adric –*

always stumbling, always shunned – until you leave the flesh behind.

'I understand... I think.'

They wouldn't hurt you any more. Their cruel words couldn't touch you.

'I've always known there was something else. Something better.'

It is what you want, Adric. More than anything. It is what I wanted.

'But how can I be sure? I've made the wrong choice in the past.'

He couldn't move. His bones had hardened and taken on new

weight. His joints had stiffened, his muscles couldn't lift his limbs It had started.

It had started, and he hadn't even made his decision. Had he? He couldn't think straight.

In a moment, you will forget your fear. In a moment, you will see things differently; as they really are. You will be free.

'What's happening? What are you doing to me?'

You are changing, evolving again. You are becoming the future.

Becoming me.

He was cold, so cold. He would have gasped, except that he could no longer draw breath. He was suffocating. 'No! No,' he whimpered, 'I don't want this. Let me go!'

And, just like that, he was released. He reeled, almost falling, gulping in warm, sweet air.

But he didn't run.

It isn't important, Adric. It is a trapping of the flesh, no more.

He didn't know what the voice meant at first. Then he looked down, and realised that his hands had moved to his belt: the simple loop of entwined reeds that had belonged to his brother, the only family he had known, his role model. *We don't need his belt to remember him.*

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The badge of the Outlers. Even this, he had not been given. He had taken it from his brother's dead body. He felt that it symbolised him, summed up his life. Always an outsider.

I have seen your future, Adric. From here, I can see everything: the roads not taken and the choices to come. lf you leave me, you doom us both to a lifetime in the cold.

'But the Doctor...'

He has changed, Adric. Once, he could have shown you the way. No longer.

'I know that. But I thought... I thought, if I could just show them...'

They don't know you, Adric. They can't see past the flesh.

He didn't know why he was bothering to argue. The voice spoke the truth – and it was offering him everything he had ever wanted.

He couldn't go back to the TARDIS now, back to his old life. He couldn't keep searching, knowing that he had already found his place and walked away from it. His fear was illogical; no more than a product of the combining chemicals in his bloodstream. It was just his body's way of maintaining its hold on him. He had been a slave to it for too long.

Join us. Let stone be your armour. Let it protect you from ignorance and cruelty.

'Yes...' he whispered.

Free your self.

'Yes. I will do it.'

This is where you belong, Adric. This is what you deserve. A lifetime of intellectual fulfilment, untempered by petty distractions. Do not take that from me, I beg you. Join me.

He was shouting now. 'Yes. Yes, that's what I want. Everything you said.'

He didn't remember closing his eyes, but it must have happened. He couldn't see the statue any longer, but he could feel its shape in his head – and he knew that it was smiling at him

Thank you, Adric. Thank you.

The stone pressed in around him again, but this time he was

determined not to be afraid. He braced himself for its cold touch – but, once enveloped in its folds, he found warmth inside. He found succour in the stone's loving embrace – and, by the time he realised that he was no longer breathing, it didn't matter to him, because he didn't *have* to breathe.

He was free of all that.

Later, he would remember little about the headlong dash back through the forest. Like his outward journey, it would take on the insubstantial 103

quality of dreams. He just knew that the Doctor's hand felt like his only anchor to reality, and he couldn't let it go, much as he wanted to.

In waking nightmares, he would see stone arms reaching for him, cold

fingers clawing at his tunic, and he would imagine that the statues had been wailing, pleading with him not to leave them, not to diminish them. He would long to ask the Doctor if the experience had been the same for him, but he would never find the words. He would be afraid of looking weak and foolish.

They slowed down as they neared the TARDIS, leaving the statues behind them. And only then did Adric recover the presence of mind to shake the Doctor's hand free.

'No!' he cried out. 'I don't want to go!'

'Adric?'

'You've spoiled everything. Why did you have to drag me away?'

Taken aback, the Doctor protested: 'Well, I believe it's called a last-minute rescue.'

'I didn't *need* to be rescued. You never asked!'

He took Adric by the shoulders and stared intently into his eyes.

'Adric,' he said, his voice quiet but firm, 'you were in a hypnotic trance. The statues were turning you into one of them.'

'I know.' Adric's body betrayed him again, filling his tear ducts and threatening to humiliate him if he tried to say more. He clenched his fists and fought to control himself.

Satisfied with his silence, the Doctor let go of him and sighed, 'It seems that every Paradise must have its serpent.' Reproachfully, he added: 'I did ask you – all of you – to stay indoors tonight if I hadn't happened to pass the console room, if you hadn't left the TARDIS

doors open...' He swept towards the glade, and just expected his companion to follow. Adric did so falteringly, one footstep at a time.

He was to be scolded now, too?

The Doctor was warming to his theme, his anxieties tumbling out of him. 'Really, Adric, for such a bright boy, you can be remarkably thick-headed. How many times have I told you about wandering off on your own, hmm?' He halted, realising that the object of his scorn was no longer trotting obediently after him. He turned, his eyebrows knitting together in concern.

‘I won’t go!’ Adric had set his jaw determinedly, but his lower lip still trembled.

‘You don’t mean that.’

‘I do!’ he howled, ‘You never listen to me!’

The Doctor snatched his hat from his head and approached his

companion as if bearding a wild beast in its den. As if afraid he might bolt. ‘Listen to me, Adric. This isn’t you. The statues... the intelligence

behind them... it’s in your mind, affecting your judgement. You must fight it.’

‘No. I’ve made my choice. I want to stay here. Why won’t you

understand?’

‘No, Adric That’s just what they want you to think.’

He shook his head fiercely. ‘ *You’re* the one who wants to control what I think. You’re the one who wants me to change, to be like everybody else. Well, I’m not like them, Doctor, I’m not!’

‘I know that, Adric. You’re unique, and very special.’ The

compliment was undermined by the Doctor’s impatient tone, ‘But we can discuss that once we’re safe inside the TARDIS.’

The mere mention of the TARDIS was too much for him. Within its sterile white corridors were all the problems, all the hurt, that Adric had tried to leave behind. He turned and fled back through the trees, towards the waiting arms of the statues.

But the only arms he found were the Doctor’s, encircling him from behind, holding him still no matter how much he shouted and kicked and thrashed.

‘You’ll thank me for this one day. ’

It was Nyssa who, in time, had coaxed him out of his bedroom. He had been in there for days, refusing to speak to anyone. Ever since the Doctor had bundled him back into the ship and closed the doors behind him, bringing the dream to an end. He had punched the life out of his pillow, and overturned every piece of furniture. He had

cried, a lot.

The Doctor had programmed the exterior doors to open for nobody but him. A child lock, Adric had thought, his cheeks aflame with resentment. Shouting had achieved nothing: he had been lost for the right words, unable to articulate his feelings. Anyway, no one was listening.

The TARDIS was in flight now, its white floor humming beneath his feet. Nyssa had erected the table beside the six-sided console, and replaced the scattered chess pieces. She had done well to remember the positions of most of them:he had only had to make a few corrections.

He was grateful for her efforts, even though the game was no more diverting than it had been before.

'The Doctor was only trying to help you, you know,' said Nyssa, unprompted.

'Well, he picked a funny way to go about it,' said Adric shortly, hoping to bring an end to the conversation. The last thing he wanted was to argue with her again.

'You wouldn't really want to live like that, would you?' she

persisted. 'Never feeling anything? Never able to laugh or cry or even
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to take a deep breath of fresh air?' A sly grin pulled at Nyssa's lips.

' *You'd* miss being able to eat.'

'It would have been worth it,' he stated flatly. 'I could have been happy.'

'You wouldn't have known what happiness was.'

'I could have been part of something... better.'

'Well, I'm sorry you feel that way.'

She was doing it again: belittling his feelings, talking as if *he* were the problem. Adric held his tongue for as long as it took to move a pawn forward one space. Then, he could contain himself no longer. 'If it would have been such a terrible fate,' he challenged her, 'then why was the Doctor so quick to take the TARDIS away from that world?

There were hundreds of statues in the forest – perhaps thousands – but he didn't feel the need to "rescue" any of them, did he?'

'No,' agreed Nyssa. 'We did discuss it. The Doctor said there was nothing we could do.'

'And you believed him, I suppose?'

'As a matter of fact, I did. He said the forest existed out of time, somehow many of the beings whom we saw petrified hadn't even

arrived yet. And those who had, well...' She let out a wistful sigh.

'According to the Doctor, everybody has to make his or her own

choice.'

'I wasn't allowed to make my choice.'

'I know.' She sounded genuinely sympathetic, and Adric looked at her in surprise.

'Then you agree with me. You'll talk to the Doctor, persuade him to take me back.'

'Very well.' He could hardly believe his ears. Until she added. But not yet.'

'Why not?' he cried, his brief hopes crushed.

'Because I want you to think about it first. I want you to be sure that it's really what you want. And, if you still feel this way in a few months' time... well, then we can talk about it.'

'What would be the point? What makes you think I'll change my

mind?'

'I know you, Adric.'

He started, and looked up into Nyssa's guileless brown eyes. He began to think that, maybe – just maybe – she could be right.

Smiling sweetly, she moved her queen to take his pawn.

'Checkmate,' she said.

The blue box faded from the glade – and, somewhere not too far away, the statue of a young male humanoid faded with it. Somewhere else, a 106

squirrel froze halfway between trees, and a bird fell silent in mid-song.

The forest was still again.

But, had there been anybody left to listen, they might have heard one soft sound. They might have assumed it to be the final gasp of the failing breeze. They might have been wrong.

Somewhere, a thousand minds acting as one mind might have let out a metaphorical sigh, despondent at the loss of a candidate so

promising. He had been young, but gifted and eager to learn. He might have enriched their gestalt, and they might have eased his pain and spared him the worse pain to come. Still, they could afford to be patient.

They would only have to wait a few short centuries for somebody else to arrive.

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Distance

Tara Samms

I

Barbara told herself to walk, not to waver down the hospital corridor.

But it didn't help. She glared down reproachfully at her unheeding legs and stopped, swaying, to catch her breath.

Which way was out? Coloured lines seemed to stretch on forever

over the polished grey tiles, directing patients to their unwelcome destinations. Wards named for obscure local dignitaries crowded brown signs, their arrows pointing all ways. She saw signs for

emergency exits marking two corners in the corridor. But this was no emergency. It wasn't.

She'd been expecting it, after all.

A couple of orange, plastic chairs had been placed in the corridor, old, school-assembly chairs. She perched on the edge of one, looked down, a dim pupil wary of catching a master's attention. But no one seemed to notice her, nor cared that she was trembling.

She could still feel the sticky jelly the nurse had smeared on her belly for the ultrasound in the darkened examination room. The grey-black vistas of her insides had pulsed and blurred on the monitor.

She'd watched it wide-eyed, but made no sense of those shifting patterns. It didn't relate to her. The scanner hove about like a ship steering through her, and she felt like a child watching stars in a black sky through sleepy eyes.

But the doctors had found what they were looking for. More

examinations were ordered, the day after tomorrow. She shuddered.

She could deal with the invasion and the pain, but –

'Mrs Chesterton?'

Barbara looked up, startled, into a girl's face: it was a plain face, pinched and pale save for blotchy red eyes. The girl was dressed in jeans and a sweater, long blonde hair scragged in a hurried ponytail.

She was too young to be one of Barbara's former pupils, so who...?

'Karen Ellis?' the girl said tentatively, as if not certain it was 108

actually her own name. 'Dr Ellis's daughter. He worked with your husband at the Institute for a time. We met –'

‘Of course, how silly of me. Frank’s girl’ Barbara smiled

disingenuously, prayed the stilted conversation they were both now committed to would be brief. ‘Must be over a year ago.’

‘And now you’re here,’ breathed Karen, staring at her almost

curiously. ‘Are you all right?’

‘Yes just… visiting. Visiting a friend.’

‘I’m visiting Dad,’ Karen said.

Barbara softened a little. ‘He’s sick?’

‘Dying.’ She quietly choked out the word as if ashamed of it.

‘I’m sorry.’ *Please don’t expect me to deal with this too*. ‘An illness?

Or…’

Karen shrugged. ‘No one knows for sure.’ She dabbed at her nose with a tissue, then paused, a strange look in her eyes. ‘Dr Chesterton’s not with you, is he?’

‘No, he doesn’t know my friend.’ *Ian doesn’t even know I’m here.*

‘What a shame.’ She bit at a hangnail on her ringless third finger.

‘Still, could you… Would you like to see Dad?’

Barbara shifted awkwardly in her chair. ‘Well, that would be nice but I’m in a bit of a…’

‘Please?’The girl placed her cold, smooth hand on Barbara’s. ‘Only it’s such a lovely coincidence. And I’m sure he’ll remember you.’

‘All right.’ Barbara’s smile warmed up. The girl was obviously

distraught, she couldn’t just leave her like this. ‘Yes, of course I will visit your dad.’

Karen squeezed Barbara’s hand gratefully. A pattern of five fawn freckles below the girl’s knuckles drew Barbara’s eye, the only flaws in that white drift of skin. They made the points of a malformed, stretched out W.

Barbara rose up, swayed unsteadily as the blood rushed to her head, shut her eyes. Oddly, she found she could still see the pattern of freckles, as if she'd been looking at bright lights and their after-image remained. Her legs were still trembling like they wanted to dump her on the tiles.

Karen steadied her, 'Are you all right?'

'Just tired' Barbara blinked away the lights.

Karen studied her intently as if seeing the truth, and steered her gently along the corridor in silence.

Frank Ellis looked like a leaky inflatable under the sheets. Barbara almost imagined she could hear the air hissing out from his white, deflated body.

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He'd been placed in a geriatric ward, though he couldn't be much older than Ian. He was staring past the row of mumbling or snoring men at the window. Traffic noise and summer breeze swished softly under the glass, a reminder that the world was still there, going on without them.

'Dad, look who I've met!' Karen's voice held the forced delight of a mother enthusing to a toddler about green vegetables. 'It's Ian Chesterton's wife, Barbara, do you remember?'

Ellis turned to look at Barbara, eyes eaten up by his large, dark pupils. His expression remained blank.

Barbara smiled kindly. 'You and Ian worked together sorting out that camera on the Hubble space telescope.'

'Space. Space and stars,' droned Ellis like a child prodded into reciting something learned by rote.

Karen stared at him in sudden reverence, like he'd just told her the meaning of life. Perhaps to him, it was. Ian had talked pointedly, but not without a degree of admiration, about Frank Ellis's devotion to his work.

'That's right, Dad!' she breathed, and clasped his limp hand. She shot Barbara a glance. 'He's not been able to talk about his work since...'

‘A unicorn.’ Ellis interrupted her. ‘Lost. Mono. One.’

Karen’s face crumpled in confusion. Barbara shrugged awkwardly

and smiled at him.

‘Always alone,’ he went on. ‘All alone.’

Karen held a breath for some time before releasing it. ‘That’s two of us, then.’ She looked up at Barbara, tiredness hardening her face,

‘Three times every day I come here and back in the car. Eight miles each way, but it feels like forever.’

‘Yes, distance can play tricks on the mind, can’t it?’ said Barbara softly, wondering how quickly now she could get away.

‘I reckon hell is like that.’ There was something odd in the way Karen was looking at her now. ‘You know, just driving up and down the same stretch of featureless road, knowing every second it’s taking you away from the hundred-and-one things you should be doing.’

Barbara felt a chill go through her. The pupils in Karen’s eyes had started to widen and darken, like her father’s.

‘You can’t stop, you see. They fix it that way. You just drive on until you fall asleep, and then you crash, of course. But you can’t die because you’re already dead. You only feel the pain for hours and hours until you die. Then you’re back in the car driving.’

‘Karen, are you…?’ Barbara felt the hairs on her neck prickling.

‘Something’s wrong with you, Karen. Should I – I’ll call for one of the 110

sisters.’

The girl kept babbling, her eyes black marbles, ‘Driving on that road, knowing it’s going to keep happening again and again,

unstoppable.’

Ellis held a pallid hand up to Karen’s mouth, and she stopped

speaking, staring at him dumbfounded.

‘She understands,’ Ellis whispered, never taking his gaze from the

window. ‘It’s all right, love. Barbara understands.’

Karen rested her head face-down in her father’s pillow. Barbara backed away from them both, baffled and frightened. She looked round for a sister, saw no one. There were only the old men, muttering, snoring, shifting in their sleep. They hadn’t noticed anything.

Feeling suddenly foolish, an alien here, she walked quickly and unsteadily away.

She couldn’t stop looking over her shoulder, as if afraid someone was going to come after her.

Barbara pulled out from the hospital car park and on to the main road; tried to focus on what she would tell Ian when he asked her how her day had been. She felt tired and flat, the strangeness of the meeting nagging at her mind.

As the bare, busy thoroughfares gave way to leafier lanes, the

afternoon sun was setting quickly.

Hers was the only car on the road. On the whole stretch of the road.

She knew because she was somewhere up in the air looking down on the wellington-green car as it thrummed along in the silence.

Her heart lurched. She was here, in the car.

She squeezed her fists round the warmed fake leather of the wheel, and her arms started shaking. She slowed her speed. Black and white arrowheads pointed her round a sharp bend. She took it jerkily.

There was nothing the other side of the bend but dark wastes, flecked with the distant visual static of tiny stars. Her body felt full of cold water, and she was floating in it, a sponge soaking up distance and time as the car went on and on. No sound. Vacuum.

It would be like this always.

With heartsick longing she recalled a huge towering mountain of darkness, its outline rolling in red clouds of crimson and grey, fringed with stars.

Something was warming her.

Warning her.

Warning her away.

* * *

111

'You silly old bitch!'

Her eyes bulged open like a knife had been stuck in her ribs. The blare of a car horn cut at her ears. Her Audi had stalled, was straddling both lanes. Traffic was piling up now, ahead and behind. She stared about, flustered, tried to turn the key in the ignition but it was stiff with the steering lock.

'Come on, then, you stupid old cow!' A middle-aged businessman

was leaning out of his car window ahead of her, red-faced with rage.

And she wanted to shout, *I don't deserve this from you. I've done things you could only dream about. I've saved lives and helped heroes and mingled with kings. I've helped preserve your past and I've fought for your future.*

But I was young then.

She caught sight of herself in the rear view mirror, terrified and shaking. The man was right.

Stupid old cow.

Tears dropping down her face, she got the Audi started and

somehow made the last miles back to the house. Ian was out – good.

She hobbled upstairs to the bedroom, and drew the curtains, and was too scared to go to sleep.

Her hand was sore from where Karen Ellis had squeezed it. She felt five tiny bruises.

II

'Barbara!'

It was Ian's third time of calling, and still no reply. He crossed to the oven, and turned the dial. Perhaps she was sleeping; he hoped so. She was looking so tired these days, though he said nothing. If she

suspected he'd noticed, she'd never let him cook the dinner or help with the pots and pans.

The oven would take ten minutes to warm up. Not liking dead time, he crossed to the bureau and began to take out some work from his briefcase to wrestle with after dinner. He pulled out a number of odd newspaper pages/and placed them on Barbara's armchair – crosswords from today's commuters' discarded papers. Like him, she liked to feel busy in her retirement.

'Ian, there you are.'

He turned and smiled. 'Yes, here I am, Barbara.' She looked pale, her eyes screwed up from the light, and her hair was mussed up, swept back from her forehead. For a fond moment he remembered the thick, dark lacquered thatch she'd coiffure so carefully in the 1960s. The time of their lives.

'I'm sorry not to have put on the dinner,' she mumbled.

'It's in hand. Have a good day?'

'Nothing exciting, a drive into town... How was the Institute?'

'Institute,' snorted Ian, 'More like a kindergarten. The teams keep getting younger and sharper, I'm not sure how much longer they'll even tolerate my ancient presence.'

Barbara smiled a little sadly. 'Your mind's still young.'

'Is it? You do realise I'm about as old now as you-know-who.' They never mentioned the Doctor outright; a part of their 'back to normality'

routine Barbara had insisted on, and one they'd never quite grown out of. 'And about as dotty. You should've heard me today –' he grabbed the lapels of his tweed jacket, put on a stern, professorial voice – 'Pass me the star charts, Ribonson – er, Robinson. Yes, thank you my boy.'

He took the charts from his briefcase, still play-acting. 'Now, Canis Minor, wasn't it? Oh, Major, you say? Major who, hmm?'

Barbara wasn't even listening. She was frowning at the dog-eared flap of night sky from the charts. 'What's that? That constellation?'

‘Which one?’ Ian squinted at the yellow specks. ‘Monoceros, you mean?’

‘Monoceros.’ Barbara repeated the word haltingly, as if tasting it.

‘The unicorn.’

‘Not one of the classicals,’ noted Ian, ‘You’d need quite an

imagination to find any sort of horse in that.’ He smiled. ‘I suspect foal play.’

Barbara forced a laugh, the way she always did when making the

effort to shrug off her mood.

He put the kettle on and retrieved their favourite mugs from the drainer. Barbara was still peering worriedly at the star chart, glancing now and then at her hand.

‘You sure you’re all right?’ Ian called.

She answered without turning, ‘I bumped into Frank Ellis’s daughter today.’

‘Frank! How is he? Finally drowned in all his paperwork?’

‘No one knows what’s wrong with him,’ she snapped. ‘He’s sick in hospital. Wasting away, his mind gone.’

Ian grimaced, ‘I’m sorry to hear that. Poor old Frank. Not seen him in over a year. Do you know which hospital he’s at?’

Barbara shook her head quickly.

He blew out a long sigh as he spooned in the coffee. ‘Funny

coincidence, you recognising our stellar unicorn.’

‘Is it?’

‘Hubble was trained on the Cone Nebula when NICMOS went

down. You know, when Frank and I –’

She turned to him ‘This Cone Nebula’s in Monoceros?’ she asked

sharply. ‘Did we ever pass through it, or travel there? With the Doctor?’

Ian raised his eyebrows in surprise at hearing the name, ‘Barbara, what’s all this really about?’

She was becoming upset, frustrated. ‘Did we or didn’t we?’

‘Well, there’s no way of telling, is there?’ He ran a hand through his thinning white hair. ‘The unicorn is just the coincidental pattern an observer saw in those stars from his position on Earth, it would mean nothing to anyone extra-terrestrial. I suppose the Cone Nebula itself is distinctive enough, but...’

Barbara was wringing her hands. ‘It looks conical, I suppose?’

Ian smiled, ‘Why is it, do you think, that man sees so many familiar patterns in phenomena he doesn’t understand? For convenience? Or for comfort?’

Barbara ignored him. ‘It looks a little like a dark mountain blocking the stars, fringed with gases?’

‘With dust,’ he corrected her automatically. ‘It’s a reflection nebula.

Tiny grains of dust catching the light of countless stars – that part’s the nebula, not the blackness.’ He poured the coffee, ‘That’s why we were using the Near Infrared Camera to look at it.’

She marched over and snatched the mug from his hand. ’What do

you mean?’

He watched her pace up and down their cosy kitchen and shrugged.

‘Well if you’d only indicated your interest in slitless grism

spectroscopy sooner I’d have –’

‘Layman’s terms, *please*, Ian.’

When she looked at him, Ian saw Barbara wasn’t angry. She was

afraid. One hand cradled the mug. The other was buried in the pocket of her cardigan.

‘Sit down,’ he suggested reasonably, ‘you’re making me dizzy. I’ll put

on the stew, then I'll tell you all about it.'

Barbara listened, but distractedly, like she was listening to

something else too. He explained how the camera on board Hubble

'saw' in infrared, and how infrared had a longer wavelength than normal light. Viewing at near-infrared wavelengths, the camera could see through layers of dust that reflected normal light; see what lay beneath.

'And what did lie beneath?' Barbara was pushing big forkfuls of stew wearily round her plate.

'Well, several new stars were uncovered, either within or behind the nebula... None as remarkable as those we already knew about in

Monoceros.'

She looked at him expectantly.

He smiled, unable to help warming to his subject. 'The two most massive stars yet discovered. Two of them, blue giants revolving around each other, each with a mass 55 times greater than the sun.' He smacked his lips as he forked down the last of his stew 'Imagine the energies they must give out.'

Barbara shuddered. 'Why did you and Frank become involved with

this camera, anyway?'

'The infrared detectors stopped functioning. Design fault. They needed to be kept at frigid temperatures, and the solid nitrogen coolant they relied on leaked away into space.' Ian smiled, 'So they needed a new design.'

'You flew out to Houston for the briefing,' Barbara recalled.

'Mmm And Frank stayed there, to pick through the old casing the servicing mission brought back.' He reached for Barbara's hand, but she snatched it away 'Poor old Frank,' he smiled easily, as if he hadn't noticed anything, wiped his lips with a paper napkin, 'He never did like to travel. Used to call airports his idea of hell.'

Barbara threw down her fork with a clatter. She was deathly pale.

‘Go and sit down,’ he told her calmly. She would tell him what was wrong when she was ready. ‘Relax. I’ll clear up here.’

Barbara woke in the night and rose carefully in the dark, leaving Ian beside her. Her feet barely seemed to brush the carpet as she moved purposefully to Ian’s office.

His desk crouched in a dark corner. She crossed to it, pressed her hot palms against the cool mahogany. The moon’s cold light picked out the calendar block she’d bought him. The cartoon for today showed two unicorns in the pouring rain, standing by a jetty as they watched Noah’s Ark float off into the distance.

‘Don’t worry,’ the first unicorn was saying confidently. ‘There’ll be another one along in a minute.’

There was a photo of Frank Ellis beside the calendar, lying on the desk blotter. He was beaming out, surrounded by scientists, men Barbara didn’t recognise. Some bulky metal apparatus sat gleaming between them all. But now that she looked, she saw that while the men remained still, there was movement elsewhere in the picture. Lights on computer panels behind them flicked erratically on and off. Through the window a sapling was brushing back and forth in the wind.

‘My soul’s been captured,’ Frank announced candidly. He alone of the men could speak. The others were motionless, silent, still forcing smiles as if nothing was untoward.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Barbara softly. She wasn’t scared, and 115

that surprised her.

‘The camera.’ Frank looked worried, ‘When the picture was taken my soul was captured.’

‘That’s not very scientific, is it?’ Barbara chided gently, ‘I mean, tribesmen in the jungle who’ve never seen a camera might think it’s –’

‘No, Barbara. You know you can’t make a judgement like that. Not you. You’ve seen too much.’ He smiled, looking so relaxed, a million miles distant from the leaky, white figure he would become, swamped by hospital bedclothes. ‘I can talk to you, Barbara. You understand.’

‘I’m not sure I do.’ Not knowing why, she reached out her fingers and touched the photograph. Frank nuzzled his tiny head against her

finger. She felt the roughness of his hair on her skin, heard him sigh.

Through the window in the photo, she could see black night was

falling, though everyone smiled on, pretended not to notice.

‘Did it hurt very much, the illness?’ she whispered, tears prickling the backs of her eyes.

‘I’m not in pain now.’ he said, ‘Not any more.’ Suddenly he grabbed her finger with both his tiny hands, dug in little needle fingers, ‘But you can’t leave me here! I mustn’t stay!’ he shouted. His eyes were beady and black. ‘You must release me.’

Barbara woke then, back in her bed. She felt heavy and sweaty,

freezing cold. She turned over and shivered next to Ian’s softly snoring warmth. Part of her wanted to go to his office now and satisfy herself there was no picture there. But it had seemed so real that the rest of her wanted to stay safe beside lan, just in case there was.

III

Barbara let Ian drive them to the hospital the next day. It had been easy to persuade him to visit his old colleague. Karen would doubtless let slip that she’d visited the hospital yesterday, but she could square that with Ian later. More stories. Once you started telling them, it was easy to keep up the pretence, even to yourself.

She felt weak, and her stomach was griping. The cold tingle in her right hand, five niggling points below the knuckles, kept reminding her of her dream last night.

They reached the hospital without incident. Barbara worried they would bump into her specialist roaming the corridors. She tightened the knot on her patterned headscarf and kept her head down, following the coloured lines, walking as quickly as she could. Ian kept a comfortable pace beside her.

When they reached the geriatric ward, Frank’s bed was empty. ‘He’s dead.’

Barbara turned, saw Karen hovering behind them. She saw the dark sparkle in the girl’s eyes.

‘I’m so sorry, Karen,’ Ian began, one hand cautiously outstretched to take hers.

‘No. ’ Barbara slapped it down with her good hand.

Ian recoiled, stared at her in surprise. ‘Karen, what happened? What made him –’

She half-smiled, craftily. ‘I’ll show you.’ With that, she turned and walked away.

‘Fetch a sister,’ Barbara told Ian. I’ll keep an eye on her.’

Ian seemed unsure, but at last he nodded and set off to the nurses’

station. Barbara followed Karen down a swift maze of corridors. Her heart beat faster as she saw Karen nonchalantly open a door marked

‘Medical Staff only’. With a nervous glance around the empty corridor she followed the girl inside.

‘Here it is.’ Karen stood at the desk in the little laboratory, tapping on a Petri dish. Something dark filled it, nudging up to the lid.

Barbara looked warily at the cloudy dish and the porcelain-white hand holding it. ‘You shouldn’t be in here, Karen,’ she said. ‘We can talk outside, come on.’

‘They took it out of him,’ Karen whispered. ‘They shouldn’t have done that. They killed him quicker.’

‘Karen…’ The gentle words of comfort dried in her mouth. Barbara knew she was right. Dead right.

‘You must come with me,’ Karen said, and held out her hand. Her eyes were jet black, there were no whites to them. Her mouth was pinched into a frightening smile. ‘Come with me, Barbara.’

‘I should fetch Ian.’

She took a step closer. ‘You haven’t told Ian about the rest, have you?’ Barbara shook her head guiltily.

‘You can help, you see.’ Karen took her hand. Her touch tingled, and she flushed, loosened the headscarf.

Then she smiled too.

Barbara allowed the girl to lead her along the maze of corridors.

They picked up speed. Soon she was trailing behind the girl like a kite, catching the wind and rising, relishing the flight.

Barbara listened to Karen giggle as she drove, like the two of them were kids up to mischief.

'He won't be lonely now,' she said. It was hot in the car with the sunshine through the glass, but Karen's skin refused even the faintest blush.

Barbara knew Ian would be worried when he realised they'd both

just disappeared, but she couldn't have waited. She was feeling strong and young. The warmth in her bones made her want to weep, and she was terrified of the spell breaking.

The pinched, nervous smile still clung to Karen's face as she swung the car round another corner and up on to the driveway of a crumbling town house. Before she knew it, Barbara was standing in the hallway.

It was cold in the house and she felt less certain that this was a good idea. All the doors in the hallway were closed except for one.

'The cellar?' asked Barbara.

Karen nodded. 'Dad worked down there.'

She knew she was supposed to go inside, to walk down the steps into the blackness.

'You can talk with him,' Karen whispered.

'I know.'

'I want to talk to him too. It's not fair'

'I *know*.'

Karen took a sulky step back. Barbara looked at her. The smile had become a grimace. Her gums were pink, shrinking from the big white teeth. Her eyes were black and glistened with tears.

Without another word Barbara walked down the steps into the

blackness.

She could see nothing. The only sound was the dull thud of her

footsteps on the wooden stairs. Her legs started to stiffen but she couldn't stop. She started limping down the stairway, thump-THUMP, thump-THUMP like a heartbeat. She wondered if she would ever reach the ground, and felt almost disappointed as it came soon enough, certain as stone under her feet. But she heard the heartbeat sound echo on.

Something gleamed ahead. A tiny green circle; and behind it the whirring of small motors. She walked slowly towards it, ignoring the blackness pressing in on her. A computer monitor. And above it a small camera pointing at her.

She could see the hazy outline of herself looking back from the monitor. No details though, just an impression. In the darkness, still feeling so warm through her body, she felt young again. Felt the same way she'd felt pushing through the doors of an old police box and finding magic inside; real magic. And she almost felt it to be working on her now She could pretend that if she pinched herself she would not wake from the spell but feel firm, fast skin beneath her touch.

Then the tingle in her masked hand, the shape of the stars, shrugged off the cosy thoughts. Why would Frank Ellis have a camera set up here in pitch-blackness?

Because he worked with infrared cameras that could see what human

eyes could not.

And as she looked at the monitor again she saw a monster forming around her. She gasped; old and foolish, she had let it trick her.

It was like a cloud masking the sun; the wispy halo of it dazzled out from the glass of the screen, eclipsed her feeble form. It was

everywhere around her. This was its lair. It moved inside her, and inside Karen, but it lived down here, dragging people into the dark so they might see it.

.*Death is just distance*

Barbara started as she heard the voice, all around her. 'Who's there?'

.Captive in a cold glass. Set me free

‘Where are you?’

The darkness in the room became flecked with dull, shifting light, like the patterns on the scan she’d endured the day before. Shapeless, meaningless, she longed to see some comfort there.

Something was rising in her, she discerned its darkness as it

stretched through the whorls of light filling her view. That vibration that had run through the TARDIS each time they took off, it thrilled her now like an old friend calling. New stars were lamping the dust motes in crimsons and blues. She was dust herself, a solitary speck out here in the infinite. She couldn’t take in the scale of the vision, the colours, any of it. Instead, with a child’s delight, she started counting the stars she could see.

?Set free

Barbara didn’t want to hear the voice. It was distracting her from the counting.

But she knew suddenly that if she didn’t hear it, she could be

destroyed.

The voice, the thing that swamped her here in the shadows, was not malevolent. It wasn’t anything much since it was shuffled so finely through everything. But it held a sense she couldn’t see and that felt dangerous to her.

The doubt spread. The beauty of the nebula she hung as part of was suddenly terrible and singular. No delight now Fear. Monsters-in-the-dark fear. Something-under-the-bed fear.

She was up the stairs and throwing open the door. The daylight had stored up its brightness to surprise her outside. Barbara screamed at the shock, fell to the floor. Her bones felt cold and old and bruised through.

‘I want to talk to Dad,’ Karen said, cross-legged on the floor.

She had a knife in her hand.

Barbara couldn’t speak. Her heart was racing, tears falling down her face.

Karen uncrossed her legs and got on all fours. Knife held high, she shuffled forwards, black eyes shining. ‘If I cut it out of you he’ll *have* to talk to me.’

‘No...’ Barbara tried to rise to her feet. ‘It’s not your father. Not now. It was only...’

But Karen wasn’t listening. Giggling like an impish child, she thrust the big blade at Barbara’s chest. Barbara fell back, and the knife jabbed into the cellar door.

‘I’ve seen hell,’ Karen growled as she tried to pull the knife free.

‘Driving. Always driving, never reaching anywhere. Why can’t I reach him? Why does it all have to spoil?’

Barbara took hold of the banister rail above her and heaved herself up. She started hobbling upstairs.

‘Have you seen better hells than mine?’ Karen yanked the blade free of the door with a delighted snarl. ‘Then you’ll want to go back there.’

Barbara kept going up the stairs. Without knowing why, she made for the third room down and flung open the door.

She looked in at a room full of scientific clutter. Ugly hotchpotches of cannibalised equipment, machines half built or half broken, their innards on rude display; Barbara knew the answer was in here, in this room of relics.

But Karen would be here too, soon.

‘What do I do?’ she croaked, old and futile.

She heard the girl’s angry shout downstairs.

Barbara started trawling through the junk, clearing the clutter from desks and benches, looking for anything that might mean something to her. The noise battered and clattered at her ears, but there was nothing here that could help, that would work, that could –

She saw the door inch open, shrank away with a low moan of terror.

Ian walked through, his face grave, uncertain. Then he saw she was safe. He smiled, moved towards her.

‘You mustn’t hold me,’ she whispered, staring at him with wide, frightened eyes. ‘Don’t touch me. I could hurt you.’

But he was looking past her as he approached, towards a miniature metal coffin. A newly shelved memory tumbled into her mind: the dream. The thing from the photo, flanked by fixed smiles.

She watched as he tugged out a chewy mass of wiring from its centre and slung it away. Reached inside again, pulling out something that glinted in the sunlight through the dusty net curtains.

‘Optical baffles,’ he said, his gravelly voice triumphant. ‘Whatever it is, it’s hiding there.’

‘Not hiding, Ian,’ she started to say, but he’d thrown the metal and glass at the floor, where it shattered.

120

Set

The crash of glass stuck solid in her head. She couldn’t see. For a moment she was old as the light from Monoceros’s fat, bloated blue stars that took thousands of years to bridge the darkness. As old as the unicorn’s myth. She wanted to lose herself and not come back, if she couldn’t know again the strength shed been lent, the purpose she’d been given.

But Ian had thrown open the window, and the cool breeze broke the spell. The sunlight was white through the window dancing with dust, and she was left counting only lucky stars as her husband held her.

They sat amid the mess of machine junk for hours, looking at the shafts of light and dust brightening the old tarnish of the room.

Barbara looked down at her hand; no fanciful pattern was etched there now; just five little ruby scab-drops.

‘How did you find me?’ she asked when she felt able to speak again.

‘Frank’s address was on his records. You see, I found the hospital lab you went to.’ He pulled her discarded headscarf from his pocket and draped it over her skinny arm. ‘I found that thing in the Petri dish, and the clinical report on its nature.’

‘Go on.’

‘A dermoid cyst. But a quite unique one.’

She knew what they were but let him explain.

‘A dermoid is a membranous sac of semisolid material growing

abnormally inside the body... they can contain skin or hair or even teeth. But this one had the doctors baffled.’

He paused. ‘I saw the scans. And to my mind... Frank’s cyst

contained what appeared to be ganglia.’

Barbara swallowed. ‘Brain cells?’

‘Nerve cells of some kind, anyway.’ He shuddered. ‘Dense clusters that are only visible, it seems, when exposed to certain wavelengths; longer than lightwaves, but shorter than radio waves.’

‘Infrared?’

‘Infrared,’ Ian agreed. ‘A link. It set me wondering how and why such a thing could’ve formed in Frank Ellis, as if trying to create an intelligence inside him... And I thought: if some force that travelled somehow along infrared wavelengths had reached the camera on board Hubble...’

‘And become trapped inside it. Cut off.’ Barbara nodded. ‘It was trying to communicate, trying to make itself heard and seen to us.’

‘Or trying to invade.’

‘No, Ian,’ she said firmly. ‘Trying to get back.’

Ian shrugged. ‘It used poor Frank, and goodness knows who else

before him.’

‘I don’t think it knew it was hurting anyone.’

Ian didn’t answer for a while, ‘I had to strike poor Karen. She came at me with a knife. I thought –’

‘She was confused. Grieving. This thing for her is all mixed up with her father. She resented me because I could communicate with the

force better than she.' Barbara smiled to herself, remembering

extraordinary days in extraordinary places. 'Because I understand a little about time. And about distance.'

The direct sunlight was obscuring the actual view outside the

window. Barbara rose, awkwardly and determined, to look.

She saw out over a street of proud Edwardian houses stretching

down the leafy avenue. Ian had found her here because Frank Ellis's address had been duly recorded in words and numbers: the practical impression of a place, like the five stars in a crowded sky had given ancient astronomers the ghost of a unicorn. They said nothing of the real place Frank Ellis had lived; of the cluttered past he shut away up here, or the future he'd been exploring down the dark stairs.

Karen could mourn her father for real now. No alien feelings to tangle and choke her own with words that were impossible to say, or feelings that knew no description. But Barbara knew now, as sure as the stars held their patterns by day while the cuckoo sun took their light, that those feelings existed. They were there inside her, and she could fmd the words if she looked hard enough, far enough.

She thought of the hospital tests booked for tomorrow, the pain and the fear she'd kept bottled up these last weeks. And she laughed now, and cried a little too, because there was so much else inside her besides.

Death was just distance.

'Ian,' she said, crossing to him and falling to her knees. She saw the confusion, the compassion in his eyes. 'Strong, darling Ian, there's something I must tell you.'

Qualia

Stephen Fewell

Hair as white as gin, gripping lapels with that patrician certainty, his magpie eyes glittered like his signet ring.

This was how he had first looked.

Hands ready like a concert pianist, he was stood at the controls, despite knowing he should never touch them. That would not be

allowed. For at any moment the craft's true owner could return, and he dare not risk his displeasure.

So he hovered in that stance, saying nothing – for all the world like a waxwork.

Only the column rose and fell in time with his breath.

We must have passed the tapestry a hundred times and never given it a second glance. The witch queen of the thousand faces, sat astride her three-legged metal steed-cum-cooking pot, was carefully picked out in magenta and gold thread.

Today she was saving our lives.

This was the way the story went. Some virtuous peasant youth, a step-child or foundling, would attract the hungry gaze of her single swivelling outward eye. Nightmarishly, the other focused inward towards her abyss-bred brain, where it could read the thoughts of mortals, good and bad alike.

We knew things would always resolve happily: the glare from the child's magic looking-glass would dazzle the witch, reflecting back the image of her own wicked thoughts. But before the candle was put out it was wise to check under the bed, just in case she was there. And as her twisted frame tumbled into the abyss, our mother's face, skin like sugared almonds, would descend with a reassuring bedtime kiss.

Another bomb explodes.

To judge by the intensity of the aftershock, it is somewhere on the lower levels. The foundations of the citadel are strong, imperial architecture certain to resist assault, but the infiltrators are monstrously clever, if nothing else we've learnt that much. Without a strong goal in 123

mind they rarely attack a target, so we hardly dare think what may have happened to the others. With the fearsome gaze of the witch queen upon it to ward off any danger, the inch thick weight of the tapestry presses us firmly against the wall. Coarse against the skin, it reeks of dust and age.

No, the dust is wafting underneath it from the corridor beyond.

Listening to the running feet and terrified cries, we must stifle the sudden urge to cough, rather than risk exposure.

News does not always penetrate the hallowed walls of the academy where we study, but we think all this began a few short days ago. Kept away from the riffraff, who lack our privileged genetic inheritance, we were notionally aware of dissent, but only in a dry book-learned way.

Now we can taste it in our mouths and feel its approaching rumble under foot.

We study with just three others, and my younger brother knows no more than I. Taldrun, the eldest, says with some conviction that the infiltrators are aliens. Our people have travelled far across the omniverse, he says, touching the destinies of hundreds of planets.

Someone, somewhere has been angered by us. Our hearts skip a beat when we think of such things. The images of aliens in our books are grotesque and intimidating, often one-eyed like the witch queen. How might they perceive us and our values?

Our xenobiology tutor scoffs at all this. Most alien life forms, he explains with monotonous regularity, have a genetic predisposition to imbecility. The troubles of the moment are minor political altercations, entirely home-grown and localised. There is no need for concern.

Slumping forward over his desk, his mouth had formed a neat O that matched the one in the centre of his forehead. That was when,

crunching over the glass from the bullet-broken windows, we had begun running.

‘Extraordinary,’ said the girl.

Was she talking to him?

‘Such an amazing piece of engineering. Whoever built it must have been incredibly advanced scientifically.’

She was standing opposite, in front of the door that led deeper into the craft, her short dark hair framing her dark eyes.

‘It’s almost unnerving,’ she added, looking at him strangely. She was fascinating, this girl, unlike anyone he had ever encountered. The weight of expectation was palpable around her.

Just what was it that she expected of him: reassurance,

companionship, comfort?

For all her instinctive distrust, he sensed such neediness. A longing
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for family, for people she had lost and might never see again. He wondered if, in time, he might come to be all those people for her.

‘The way’, she continued animatedly, ‘it can change its appearance so effortlessly.’ Out of pride, he couldn’t avoid giving her a snaggle-toothed smile. ‘It’s hard to believe’, she responded, ‘that it’s just a machine, because it seems so – well, so alive.’

That was what she wanted above all else, he realised; someone to talk to.

He would answer her.

‘Yes, my dear. By the way have you noticed that all this machinery here’, he punctuated his words with a finger stabbed towards the controls that shouldn’t be touched, ‘appears to have been set in motion.

‘Hmm?’ He harrumphed, head inclined and gimlet-eyed.

‘Where is it taking us, eh?’ he said quietly, to himself though clearly for her benefit. ‘I hardly dare guess.’ The idea seemed to please the girl.

‘You spoke to me,’ she smiled.

A blaring alarm somewhere in the distance is now all that remains of the tumult. We emerge squinting into the light, brushing ourself off, and try to decide which way to go. The noise headed in the direction of the departure bay, no doubt planning escape. But how can we join them? We cannot pilot a craft.

A sudden arrival startles us. Thankfully a guard, his familiar red uniform provoking a wave of relief; until we realise its colour disguises the good deal of, blood he is covered in.

‘Get away from here,’ he grunts, blinking it from his eyes, ‘they’re coming. Nothing’s going to stop them.’

Then, studying our face, he sighs in recognition.

‘By the forty futures’, he gasps, ‘It’s you.’

The boy marvelled, he was saying, that two such apparently different individuals could really be the same person.

The girl had got to know the original Doctor better than the boy. She thought the old man had even seemed, over time, to come to like her; but this one was an unknown quantity. This one they had known only a matter of minutes.

So as they blinked away the afterimage of the fierce glow that had shrouded his form, neither of them could predict how he would behave.

The man before them seemed to share their uncertainty.

‘Oh dear,’ he shrugged, glancing at the oscillating glass column,

‘Where’s the Doctor? Hadn’t we better put a stop to all this in case he should come back?’

He was shorter now, his clothes outsized and clownish, with an

unruly thatch of Beatle-black hair. Pensively he clapped his hands together, like a one-man band discovering his instruments missing, before starting to caper round the instrument bank in the centre of the room.

‘Part of the TARDIS, part of me,’ he muttered, frowning in

concentration as his hands scanned the controls. ‘Where is it now?’

This was freaky. ‘He’s right. You’re right. I don’t think we should touch anything,’ said the girl anxiously. But it was too late.

The little man jumped exaggeratedly away, blowing on his fingers’

ends. ‘Oh my giddy aunt!’

They would never find us here. Find her here.

Nobody knew about this hiding place.

She hoped they would start soon. She couldn’t wait to hear them call her name, searching for her everywhere. The anticipation was

delicious; sweeter than the bellyful of marzipan which helped make her so hot and tearful to start with.

Like a summer storm, the argument had come out of nowhere.

She wouldn't come if they called. Oh no. Better to wait until the voices had faded into the distance, and emerge unseen. Then they would be truly surprised to see her, asking where she had been all the time, while this place would remain her secret.

Overhead the circle of light grew a deeper blue. If only they would hurry.

When she had climbed down the rope the sun was overhead,

throwing a luminous round upon the dry bottom of the well. Then, as she crouched in the gloom, it slowly crept up the side of the narrow shaft, becoming oval, then g old and hovering at the lip.

Now it had vanished altogether.

Her father and brothers would have their cake later. They were out in the fields working. Nana was dozing on the porch in the old cane chair with the saggy bottom, her hat pulled down to keep the sun off.

Auntie had a hat. A big broad-brimmed straw one, with sunglasses that made her look like a wasp and a giant handbag full of make-up and beads. She had been allowed to borrow them, to see if they matched her birthday present: not a home-made dress like mother made, but from a boutique in the city.

'Thought I would show you where I live,' said her postcard, with its tall shiny buildings and giant rusty bridge. Now dog-eared with affection, she had always kept it in a box under the bed with her other special things; a feather from the martyr bird, a chunk of minor, seeds for her garden, a stone that looked like a face, and now if there was roam, the dress.

'Can I wear it now?' she had asked, running from the room before the answer.

'Yeah, go to your room,' her mother called, 'your Auntie doesn't want a strip show now.'

She had glanced at herself in the mirror. The plum colour brought out the red fleck in her hair, dark, not fair like her brothers. Abo blood, her dad would tease.

She smiled. From now on, if anyone asked, this would be her

favourite colour.

It was then, through the wooden floor, she had felt the raised voices.

How did they all work? He simply didn't know, and it would be

dangerous to try any half-remembered procedures. He couldn't even begin to guess.

Now he had changed again, this Doctor's body was longer and

lankier, albeit clad in well-tailored clothes which carefully emphasised its stature. He grazed his cheek thoughtfully with a long finger and studied the controls, as if preparing a sentence they held the answer to.

The minute that the thought crossed her mind, he did it.

The filled flourish of the wrist. The tiny tug of the earlobe before he spoke, probing the thought as it coalesced, somewhere between the mid brain and the tip of the tongue. But instead of speaking he closed his eyes, reaching out to the mushroom-shaped control panel in front of him and – at once both confident and hesitant – grasped the two circuits firmly.

He sank up to his elbows.

Together they creaked up the staircase to where he would spend this first night, the straight-backed man with the moustache carrying the suitcase heavy with items hurriedly salvaged from the Ship as it had sparked and smoked around him. What have you got in here?' he

puffed. 'It weighs a ton.'

'Just the bare essentials.'

Conversation in the car had been sparse. He wished he had been

driving. The feeling of power over the primitive engine would help dispel the aftertaste of enforced passivity left by enduring the spasmodic journey from London. The gawping faces and the pinstripe

suits. The mumbled horror when he pointed out the No Smoking sign to some illiterate.

Perhaps he would steal the thing one day, and take it for a spin.

As they moved down the wood-panelled corridor, doors were

soundlessly opening behind him That static prickle upon the back of his neck signalled the weight of several gazes measuring him up, ready 127

to vanish should he turn around. What would they all have been told about him, he wondered.

After all, they must have been given some kind of story. Or perhaps he would have to hurriedly improvise one when he finally came to meet the other residents. The fact that the Brigadier had met him at the station should have shown them he was important. The military man didn't carry just anyone's bags, surely?

'This all right for you then?' he had said briskly. The room was magnolia and sparse, one narrow window looking out over the

grounds. He could, open that – disperse the institutional odour of must and boiled cabbage. At worst he could even knot the bedsheets together and make a daring bid for freedom, but where would he go? His exile meant that this room, *this* view, was as good as any other.

'Fine, thank you, Brigadier.' The bright edge in his voice failed to conceal his despondency. The old house, the well-kept grounds, the beautiful countryside, the whole planet, was a prison.

In one corner, over a cracked white basin, a mirror caught his

attention. Just for a second he didn't recognise the reflection. He had changed, of course. He looked older, careworn. He might well do after everything he had just been through.

The Brigadier's footfall faded into the distance and he sank down on to the protesting mattress. For the first time in ages, possibly even years, he was truly alone.

As if in response he found himself imagining her face again. She was trying to tell him something, his mother. Face sugar-pale and tearful, she once more mouthed the words that became her forewent only he could remember what they were.

Light years from home, exiled in a sea of English institutional tradition. Cut off from all that he had ever known.

At least the pillow proved mercifully soft.

Soft enough to bury both his face and the sobs suddenly welling up inside his aching body.

‘Doctor. Doctor!’ the girl was calling.

The figure was slumped forward as if drunk, his curls amplifying every judder of his body. The air smelled of burnt almonds.

The boy, he knew, had never seen him looking like this.

He and the girl were helpless, and their panic only intensified his own distress. The girl – Tegan, that was her name – moved towards him in a gesture of concern but the boy restrained her. ‘Don’t,’ he was saying, ‘It may not be safe to touch him.’

Teeth gritted against the agony, he fell on to his knees, his long red coat spreading wide like a puddle.

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She didn’t want this. Tegan wanted him, he sensed, to be like he was when they first met; brooding, mysterious, yet utterly dependable.

Reaching out to comfort her, he remembered he could no longer move his arms.

And what did she want the Doctor for, wasn’t that was who he was?

He felt the shudder of a new arrival approaching as, with the

familiarity of something always forgotten, the white light engulfed him. It made sense now: it was the Doctor coming, the next one.

Everything was going to be all right.

The air exploded with a blizzard of light.

As soon as she woke up she had known that she had been dreaming.

Not the funny one where the Doctor was married and tried to sell her saucepans. No, it had been a dream of childhood, of her mother.

Who, as she awoke, in something of a surprise move, turned out to be standing by her bed. Both her blouse and apron were crisp and newly starched. Her eyes, though smiling, were distant as a horizon.

'Hello Tegan,' she said.

And he was sat watching her, perched in the peacock back chair like a malevolent leprechaun, green eyes interrogating her from beneath his politician's eyebrows.

'Why do you do that?' he asked.

'I might ask you the same thing.' She had pulled the covers upward defensively, a gesture undermined by the fact that she had gone to bed fully clothed. The irregularity of her sleep patterns here meant she'd long since abandoned all pretence of the old twenty-four-hour day. Her chin jutted out aggressively, 'Where I come from it's generally considered ill mannered to watch someone while they're sleeping.'

He smiled and looked at her mother. 'Did she teach you that?'

'I said, what are you doing in here?'

'I followed him in,' he smiled. And still his eyes had never left her mother.

He lay on his back in the wet grass and inhaled his first breath deeply, his view of the sky obscured by the criss-crossing of girders and three young, anxious faces.

'Are you all right, Doctor?'

He struggled to sit upright. And remember.

His clothes were loose and heavy upon him. It was such a shame he had had to change. He had so liked those boots.

Stop.

The Doctor's expression was part panic, part fury.

On reflection Tegan was relieved he hadn't walked in to find himself

already in the room. She knew from experience how unpleasant that could be. And only the other day he'd been saying how, what with all

that hoohah back on Gallifrey, he'd had enough of old memories for the moment thank you very much.

Picking themselves up off the floor, he demanded an explanation.

She knew they didn't actually have a decent justification. One thing had led to another: the devil making work for their mixture of idle curiosity and boredom. Then again she had genuinely wanted to show Turlough the Doctor she had first known. The one who hadn't turned up. The mad-eyed, moody one.

So there was just the small matter of how the TARDIS came to be shaking itself to pieces and Kamelion sunk elbow deep in the control console, like her mother at the kitchen sink.

Oh yes – and her mother true to form, had started all this trouble in the first place.

They had both followed her, entranced, weaving through the

corridors to the heart of the timeship – the flight deck as she always thought of it – and started playing.

'We were only trying to –' Turlough began, but Tegan shut him up with her best, stare. Turlough and protestations of innocence went together like dingoes and the provision of childcare.

Surprisingly, the Doctor controlled his anger. Scientifrc curiosity, as always, could trump almost any other emotion.

'It would seem that Kamelion here has a particular affinity for Tegan's mind,' he mused.

Despite not wanting to push her luck, she didn't like that tone of voice; as if the very idea was extraordinary.

'That's only remarkable because the two of you have the opposite opinion,' she said.

And they all fell over.

Where the banister met the ceiling was the best place to sit. One stair down from the top, you could tuck your ear in the triangular gap and hear everything the grow-ups said downstairs.

'You could have come to visit at any time. We've not moved, Nessa, we're right here where you left us –'

‘Yes, and I’m ruddy glad I did,’ muttered Auntie.

‘– and will be a few years yet to come, I shouldn’t wonder.’ Even when regularly arguing with Dad, she had never heard her mother sound like this.

‘Have you seen yourself lately? He’s worn you down, Joy. All this –’

she paused, gesturing around no doubt – ‘has worn you down. The cooking, the cleaning, looking after mother. You’re wasting your life, 130

just like she didis this what you want for Tegan?’

‘Don’t you tell me. Don’t you talk to me –’ Was it because Auntie, she wondered, had mentioned Nana that mother had got so angry?

‘Why shouldn’t I?’

‘You left her.’

‘So bloody what!’

She was only on the porch. Auntie would wake her up, shouting like this. ’People do leave home. It is normal!’

Silence.

She wondered now it had finished whether to creep back to her

room, carefully without the stair creaking, or run into the kitchen in her new dress as if nothing was wrong.

‘Well it turned out lucky for you, didn’t it?’ The voice was faint and threatening, full of sour distaste it was unrecognisable It was Mum.

She couldn’t hear any more.

‘You were quick enough to take her,’ returned Auntie Vanessa. She couldn’t listen any more.

Running and explaining were his two favourite things. At the same time, preferably.

Kamelion worked, he improvised, by tapping directly into the

memory centres of the brain and using that information to create

holographic simulacra of any individual his controller should desire.

He flung open a door, and popped his head through.

‘Look, what exactly are we looking for, Doctor?’ Turlough

interrupted testily, bracing himself against the wall. Tegan shushed him, and the breathless gibberish continued.

The problem could possibly be the nature of the memory in question.

‘So it is your fault, Tegan,’ sneered Turlough.

‘Or yours,’ countered the Doctor.

‘Or, for that matter, yours even,’ the boy replied.

What did he want, a house point?

Let me get this right, she thought, it was their memories causing all this. It wasn’t as if she could switch hers off.

They were still not calling for her, and the well was filling with dusky dampness. So she climbed up the fraying rope to the top, and made her way inside; frightened of what she might find.

Dad was carving the lamb. ‘Where have you been, you little terror?’

he said.

They must have made up because everyone laughed together, and

Mother and Auntie were holding hands tightly under the table.

‘Nessa’s come all this way,’ said Mum, her eyelashes stuck together.

‘And I’ve almost missed you.’

‘He’s always managed in the past. What’s changed?’

The Doctor murmured something cryptic about a cumulative effect and possible dangerous interaction with rewired telepathic circuits before bounding off down a new corridor. Part of the TARDIS, partly Kamelion, Tegan realised.

Then he stopped short, like a character at a cartoon precipice. ‘Of

course,' he exclaimed 'Qualia.'

The guard got us as far as the departure bay, before collapsing exhausted, against the wall. Barely able to speak, he lay there panting as we questioned him about our parents, certain their position of authority would mark them out as targets.

Then again, by that token so are we.

Where were they?

It was hard to tell whether his silence and glazed expression

stemmed from formulating an appropriate answer, or simple pain and physical trauma.

'Don't worry. We can handle the truth, however bad. We just need to know.' Still no response.

'They're dead, aren't they?'

More explosions interrupt the direct response we were after. Even if he had been lying we would have known; gauged it from his

expression, a flicker of the eye, a touch of the brow. Now it was too late: he was dead. And gradually we realise we might never see her face again.

The farewell had been so ordinary, so nondescript. We had been

returning to the academy, she to the family seat to prepare for one of the innumerable formal occasions. The partings were never easy, but they had eventually come to tolerate them. Both played them down so as never to upset the other with an awkward display of emotion. But there had been no special message, no declaration of love; in fact he couldn't even think what her last words had been.

They were getting closer. Guttural cries of triumph punctuated the bombing, as across the departure bay masonry powdered down upon the body litter. One craft was left, impounded for repairs in the far left holding dock. But even if it had worked properly we could never operate it. So, shielding our eyes from falling debris, we scan the wide hangar for movement; for anyone who might help us. No one was

alive.

No one until the first of Them entered, jubilant. Spitting lead at the

ceiling, his gun has a makeshift flag around its barrel – from this 132

distance hard to make out. Is it a broken triangle with a glaring single eye, black and thick-lashed? Or a radiating sun?

We instinctively flatten, and hitting the ground realise we are not alone after all.

Almond eyes wide with terror, she is squatting behind a bulkhead, out of their line of sight. Blood-soaked and wired, more of Them flood in with laughs of success, expressions unreadable behind gas filters and tied cloths. What must they look like underneath?

Looking up, she makes a panicked eye contact before a brief nod of recognition.

This may be our only chance.

'This way, quickly,' we mime, 'There's one left, but stay low.'

Tentatively, she slips from her hiding place, almost reaching us before the echoing crack.

Time imperceptibly slows to a crawl before the impact. When we

look downwards to see our blood there is an alien whoop of pleasure, and it is she that falls motionless to the ground.

We don't know whether to cradle her, or raise our arms aloft in supplication. But one thing is certain now. We would definitely never see her again.

And her hair smelt of rain as she kissed us goodbye. No – kissed me.

Kissed him.

'Didn't they teach you Latin at that school, Turlough?'

'Qualia? Plural of the Latin quale –' He shrugged as the meaning escaped him.

'As a term it describes the specific characteristics of someone's subjective experience of reality.' As if that explained everything.

It may not be Latin, but it still wasn't English.

'Tegan.' His eyes rocked skyward, 'What details do you remember

about your childhood, hmm? How tall your brothers were in exact feet and inches? The precise number of grey hairs on your father's head?'

She could tell the answer he so urgently required, and casually withheld it. 'Possibly.'

He looked utterly crestfallen.

'Okay, no Doctor.'

'Exactly my point. Your memory, all human consciousness in fact, revolves around certain shared subjective experiences. The taste of pineapple, the smell of freshly ground coffee, the feel of a newly made bed: experiences that have a distinct phenomenological character –'

English, she reminded him

'– experiences we all share and comprehend, but which can never hope to be fully described, let alone scientifically or objectively 133

measured.' Even Kamelion's people, it seemed, as staggeringly

neuroscientifically evolved as they were, couldn't hope to achieve that.'

Tegan recapped to make sure she had understood. 'When Kamelion

read their minds –'

'Well technically speaking he only translates thought transmissions from the quantum penumbra of your brain,' the Doctor gushed.

'Okay, when Kamelion picked up chunks of their memories, along

with the objective information such as age, height, hair colour, etcetera, he also – receives an impossibly dense influx of memory Qualia

associated with that individual. Yes.'

Like a mosie that's accidentally struck a big artery, Tegan thought, Kamelion had been overwhelmed by all these bits of their past.

'And subjective memories are beyond the range of his perception,'

the Doctor concluded.

‘Like a dog whistle to a human?’

‘Excellent, Turlough, exactly that.’ So he’d got that house point after all. Tegan’s head hurt, and it wasn’t from colliding with the wall, or the terrible shrieking that suddenly filled the corridor.

It had taken him all day to climb the mountain.

Higher up, the air was thinner, so his progress had become broken with pauses to regain his strength. But now, as the first sun set behind the Capitol, he was finally here. He wondered if the hermit was expecting him.

No, he thought, I won’t have this. He knew what was happening, and it was going to stop right now.

His memory was, the Doctor decided, for his eyes only.

‘This’ll zero out all the white-noise Qualia and give Kamelion a well-earned respite every now and again.’ He grinned lopsidedly, tapping the casket. It looked, Turlough thought, as if he’d made the thing himself out of TARDIS offcuts.

‘So we lock him in a cupboard?’ said Turlough, as the lid slid shut over the paralysed screaming form, ‘That’s hi-tech.’

‘Anything to stop that noise,’ Tegan sighed, collapsing exhausted on to the floor, ‘He was in such painit was terrible:

They had helped the Doctor carry the cabinet back to the control room where, amid much swearing and falling over, Kamelion, sparking like a dodgem, had been extricated from the TARDIS workings. Just like the giant turnip, she mused to herself.

‘Tegan, Kamelion’s only a machine,’ the Doctor protested. ‘He can’t feel pain, not as you or I would understand it.’

She could teach him, thought Tegan. Demonstrate on Turlough.

She looked from one to the other. Surrounded by aliens, if she didn’t have a sane conversation soon it wasn’t just Kamelion who’d be going gaga. Anyway, it wasn’t just that they were both aliens, after all she’d never felt this way with Nyssa around. No, it was as if they had some bond that she could never be part of.

Some shared experience.

All alone now in the dark, the pain has subsided and the thoughts and memories were likewise fading into the distance.

He hoped he had pleased them, entertained them, taught them something – whatever it was they had wanted in the first place. At the very outside, brought back a sense of what those people had been like, the people that they missed.

He hoped they would want more.

Then he would once more, for that brief spell, finally have a reason to exist.

Why was it that she never knew how she felt until too late?

The icy wind stung their eyes on the roof of terminal four. She had arrived just in time to miss him. The slightest hint of blue hanging in the air was all that remained.

'I thought you were going with him,' said the man

So had she.

'Are you happy here with us, Tegan?'

Unlike usual his button-eyed gaze was fixed upon her, steady under his blond fringe. With all her heart it was what she had willed him to say, and yet when the question finally came she found that she couldn't form an answer.

'Because it's important to me that you are. I've got used to having you around and, for all our ups and downs, to be frank I can't face the thought of not having you around.' His concerned expression

blossomed into a full blown smile, the one that revealed his deliciously imperfect teeth.

'Yes, of course I am,' she replied quietly, knowing with a sudden certainty she would never hear the Doctor frame the question himself.

And so it didn't really matter whether he heard or not.

As Tegan slid the door shut, indecision shadowed her features.

Shadows thrown by a shimmering blizzard, and the rapidly coalescing

silver shape within.

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Curriculum Vitae

Simon Guerrier

‘Which one of you ladies is Ms Wright?’

They had kept her waiting for twenty minutes. She sat in the cluster of low, hard seats to the side of reception, and made small talk with a girl half her age and here for the same job. She refused to let that get to her.

Like her, the girl had chosen primary colours. She, too, had chosen broad shoulders, big hair and a skirt short enough to attract glances, and had spent the larger part of her money on the accessories. We must look like mother and daughter, she thought. But that wouldn’t get to her either. It mustn’t. The job was hers.

The man who’d interrupted them was younger than her, just, which came as in unpleasant surprise. He had the ponytail and ratty little beard she might have expected. Like everyone else she had seen working here, he wore black. Exclusively. The suit was probably some Japanese designer, the sleeves ready-rolled up above his elbows. It said everything about him – his style, his money, his carefully assembled cool.

Now he smiled a ratty smile at the girl, entirely ignoring the older woman He hadn’t looked her way when he’d asked the question, either –

not a good sign.

‘I’m Ms Wright,’ she said, firmly. The man’s smile flickered. He turned to her.

‘Of course you are,’ he said. ’I’m John Eliot Maurice.’

‘Pleased to meet you, Mr Maurice,’ she said, shaking his hand.

Maurice winked at the girl.

‘With you shortly,’ he said.

Ms Wright kept pace with his long strides, entirely in control of her

new high heels. He led her into a large office decked out in stylish black furnishings and with a startling view across Soho's rooftops. Maurice went over to the window, leant his back against it. The rain thrummed seriously behind him.

'Oh,' he said, waving at a chair in front of him. 'Sit yourself down.'

He lit a cigarette, a Marlboro red, as she demurely made herself 136

comfortable. He must smoke in here a lot, she thought. The ingrained whiff of old cigarettes made her nostrils flare. Still, she sat immaculately, straight backed with her manicured hands placed gently, one on top of the other, on her thigh. Her glossy nails set off the colour of her blazer perfectly. Maurice's beady eyes twitched over her face and clothes, itemising her. She smiled back at him, prettily, and he quickly glanced away. Her large, beautiful eyes were a throwback to the sixties, and made her striking looking. She still did her make up to emphasise them.

Taking his time over his cigarette, he looked over his notes –

presumably her CV. She had put her whole life down on just two sides of paper. What would he pick holes in first?

'Your name,' he said, at length. 'Is it short for something?'

'No,' she said.

'You're not a Penelope, or a Pauline?'

Again, she had a pretty smile for him 'Actually, it comes from

"Mary". Originally, anyway. You know, "Mary", "Molly" and then

"Polly".'

'Then you're really a Mary?' he said.

'No.'

Just for a second he looked startled. He glanced again at the pages he was holding. 'I must admit,' he said, 'when I saw "Polly" on your CV, I thought, well, that you'd be...' In the immediate absence of the appropriate word, he twirled his cigarette.

'Younger?' she suggested, brightly. He might already have made up his mind about her, but she wouldn't make it easy for him.

Coolly, he took another drag.

‘It says here you were a PA before,’ he said. ‘Tell me about that.’

Polly sat forward. ‘I’ve always had a skill for looking after creative people. While they’re… *being creative* and having ideas, they want someone to run round after them, someone to take notes, or book flights and hotels for meetings and things. And they want someone to make coffee. And that’s me.’

‘You make good coffee, do you?’ He didn’t make it sound like a joke.

‘I’ve got references.’

He finished the cigarette two-thirds of the way through, and crushed it into a smart black ashtray on the desk. Maybe he’d been on one of those management courses where they teach you emphatic gestures. He

plumped himself down into the smart leather throne behind the desk and put his fingertips together. He still didn’t look directly at her. Like a naughty child, he kept finding other things in the room to focus on.

‘If you’re so organised, shouldn’t you be running a company for yourself?’ he said.

‘I’m quite happy making coffee.’

‘You don’t have ambitions?’

‘A woman my age doesn’t need ambitions, not like that.’

‘That’s quite an old-fashioned attitude.’

‘I’m an old-fashioned girl.’

He nodded, and picked up the packet of cigarettes again, turning it over in his hands. ‘The thing is,’ he said, ‘as cool as that is, this is still a modern agency. We’re trying to push things here, do things nobody else does. We have to be bang up-to-date just to operate. You see –’

‘2Unlimited,’ she said.

‘What?’

She took care not to speak too eagerly, but she'd finally got his attention. 'They've been at number one since yesterday,' she said. 'I expect they'll still be there next week. Don't you agree, Mr Maurice?'

'Possibly, yes...' he said, brusquely. 'But the thing you have to remember about the charts –'

She didn't let him finish. 'I learned a long time ago that you have to be grounded in the past as well as in the present and future,' she said. 'You can still be old-fashioned and completely up-to-date.'

'I... suppose so,' he said. He was looking at her oddly, now. He took his time. 'So,' he said, 'you know the music business?'

'I know all sorts of things.'

Again, she smiled prettily at him, and this time he held her gaze. He even allowed himself to smile back, properly, his eyes joining in.

'Okay.' he said. 'Give me a bit of background. How did you get to be sitting in front of me today?'

'The company I've been with for the past twelve years has had a rough time of it lately,' she said, breezily. 'And in amongst the belt-tightening, the managing director lost his PA.'

'They let you go?'

'Oh, they offered me a package and were all very apologetic. And I know there's a lot of it about these days.'

'Very true,' he said. He looked away again – scrutinising the grain of the desktop. 'Makes you wonder how Major got in again.' It was a canny line – Maurice again on the offensive, trying to trip her up. He'd be asking about her religious beliefs next. Anything to throw her.

'Mmm,' she said.

When she continued not to rise to the bait, he tried another tack. 'Are you married?'

She didn't flinch. 'Not any more.'

He raised an eyebrow. 'Single?'

She leaned forward. 'If you're asking me whether my private life is ever going to intrude upon my professional life Mr Maurice, the

answer is no.'

'Sure,' he said. 'But you know the role would call for late nights, early mornings. There's a lot of stress.'

'I do appreciate that.'

He glanced again over her CV. 'You've always worked in London?'

'Always.'

'You never wanted to travel?'

'Oh.' she said 'I've travelled. More than you'd believe.'

'Really?' He sat back in his seat. 'Tell me about it.'

'Well,' she said. 'These days everyone's travelling, aren't they? That girl waiting in reception's from Australia, you know. And she used to be a stewardess – she's flown all over everywhere. When I was her age, the world was a bigger place. People did travel in the sixties, but it was different. Going abroad, even just to soak up the sun, was like going to another planet. Travel like that... it changes your perspectives. Makes you a different person.'

'Perspectives?' he said.

She took a deep breath. 'Take Neil Armstrong. He must have found life very difficult in the seventies. I mean, you can't just come back and get on with things can you?'

'You can't?'

'It changes the course of your life. Normal everyday things – you know, income tax, the gas bill, working in an office – they're just not important any more. Not once you've been on the moon. You come back and it all seems small. Nothing that used to be important seems to matter any more. Because you've got a different perspective.'

'I hear a lot of former astronauts get into drinking or kooky religions,'

he said, sliding another cigarette from the pack.

'That's the easy way to deal with it,' she said. 'It's hard work to find your feet again.'

‘You’re the expert,’ he said. ‘So when would this have been – your travelling?’ he asked.

She looked up at the ceiling while she counted back. ‘1966,’ she said.

‘I was twenty-three.’

‘So it was a sixties thing,’ he said, reaching for the lighter. ‘You dropped out.’

She laughed. ‘Not at all!’

‘Oh,’ he said, disappointed. ‘So what were your earth-changing travels all about, then, if not just the summer of love?’

‘The summer of love was a year later,’ she chided, the seriousness back in her voice. ‘And it was all very silly. I travelled… well, there was a group of us, but really I was travelling with this man.’

‘I see,’ said Maurice, meaningfully.

‘It wasn’t like that,’ she said firmly. ‘He was older than we were, 139

much older. But he showed us such incredible things.’

‘Far out.’

‘Oh, he didn’t look much. You might pass him by in the street. But he made a difference.’

‘And you think that’s important, making a difference?’

‘Don’t you? Why else do you come into work every morning?’

‘I don’t come into work every morning. Let me tell you about making a difference.’ His voice had an edge now, a gruffness that didn’t just come from the cigarettes. For the first time since she’d met him, he didn’t sound bored. ‘I’ve worked with nearly a hundred bands and singers. Every last one of them thinks they’re something new, something to shout about, something to shake the world up. Maybe five per cent of them are still working eighteen months down the line, when it’s time to sign the next contract. They’re all the same.’

‘The Doctor made a difference,’ she said.

‘Is that what he called himself? Did he have a top hat and cape?’

‘I… I never found out his real name,’ she admitted.

‘But he *was* some kind of act? How did he end up?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘I once met a guy called Doctor,’ he said.

‘He wasn’t a singer.’

‘This guy was in insurance, I think. Strange, scruffy little guy?

‘Really?’ said Polly, trying to still the excitement welling inside.

‘Couple of years ago,’ he went on, ‘when we had the fax machines installed, all sorts of odd things started happening. One of the janitors was even killed. Then this little guy – a doctor – turned up. Kicked up a bit of a stink, he did, but it all sorted itself out.’

She bit her lip. ‘Was he… on his own?’

‘That was the funny thing. He came with this bolshy teenager who argued with everything he said.’

Now she was beaming. ‘Was he Scottish?’

‘There was an accent, sure.’

‘That’ll be Jamie – he never listened. I know both of them!’

Maurice squished out the cigarette, again two-thirds of the way down.

‘I hate to disappoint you,’ he said, without suggesting he meant it, ‘but it was the Doctor who was the Scottish one. The bolshy teenager… she was a girl.’

Polly took a deep breath. ‘Oh. maybe it’s not the same person.’

‘It doesn’t matter.’ He shrugged, but he must have noticed the

wavering of her voice. He lent forward, clasped his hands together and looked right at her. ‘Look, I’ll be straight with you,’ he said. ‘I don’t see the job being suitable for someone with your experience.’

‘I’m more than capable,’ she said. ‘You must realise that.’

‘That’s just it,’ he said. ‘You’re *too* capable. You’d get bored.’

‘I see,’ she said. ‘I’m *too* experienced.’

‘You do understand.’

‘Of course I understand. What you mean is that I’m too old.’

He’d been about to light yet another cigarette. He put it down on the desk. ‘That’s not what I said, is it?’

‘That’s not what you ever say. Do you know, at my last interview they told me I’d been out of work too long. How can six weeks be too long?’

‘I don’t know,’ he said, sheepishly.

‘How old is too old to make your coffee, to keep your diary in order?’

‘That’s really got nothing to do with it,’ he said.

‘Rubbish,’ she said. ‘It’s always been the same. When I was in my twenties, I could get a job no one believed I’d actually be able to do. Just because of what I looked like. The only thing that’s changed since then is me. You’re still making your decision based on what I look like. Have you even read my CV?’

‘Of course I have,’ he said. ‘And it’s your CV that tells me that you –’

‘It doesn’t tell you anything about me,’ she snapped. ‘Nothing

important. Let me tell you, I’ve walked on the moon. I don’t care what you think. I’ve faced things you couldn’t imagine and I made a

difference. I saved people’s lives and I gave them a chance to go on living. Do you know how hard it was to come from that –’she waved her arm around, at the office, at the rooftops outside – ‘back to this?’

Maurice let her finish. ‘Tell me, Ms Wright,’ he said, his tone nasty.

‘When you were travelling, back in the sixties... did you ever try LSD?’

‘Never,’ she said, matter-of-factly. ‘You’re the one in the music industry.’

Maurice didn’t say anything for a long time, but just sat staring at her.

She held his gaze. He blinked first.

‘I really don’t know what to make of you,’ he admitted.

Polly smiled. ‘You could make me your PA,’ she said.

He nodded – actually considering it. ‘I do have other people to see,’ he said. ‘But –’

‘You’ll let me know,’ she said. They shook hands, and then, on an impulse, he walked with her back to reception. There they shook hands again, and Polly looked over at the Australian girl, waiting her turn eagerly, and now with the top two buttons of her blouse undone.

Maurice didn’t even glance at her until he had seen Polly out of the door.

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Notre Dame Du Temps

Nick Clark

The Doctor had disappeared.

Then again, there wasn’t much new about that: he often disappeared for days on end without mentioning the excursion to either Anji or Fitz.

In the early days Anji had used to think he left them to have adventures on his own. Part of her had been glad of the rest; another part was annoyed at him for hogging all the fun; and yet another part was irritated at being left alone with Fitz.

Now, having known the Doctor for longer, she thought it much more likely that he had ambled off to look for something and got lost or sidetracked in one of the libraries or laboratories. He had once claimed the TARDIS contained a *leviathanry*, so perhaps that was what he was searching for. He probably spent days wandering around with an air of interested bemusement trying to find his way back to the console room again having forgotten what was so essential to find in the first place.

Anji was in one of those many libraries now. She had read all of the books in the console room’s collection, swam in all the pools and jogged down all the corridors. She had set out to find the Doctor

herself. Either she would catch him red-handed having fun without her and have the pleasure of watching his childlike expressions contort with the necessity of making excuses, or she would have the even greater pleasure of finding him lost and aimless in the TARDIS corridors and then guiding him back to safety. As she glanced in between the bookshelves, an image came to her of him poring over a mammoth tome and somehow

becoming trapped amongst its pages. He would push and heave against the jaws of the book, its giant bookmark tongue lolling out and around, unable to escape until she arrived to helpif she arrived too late she would find him pressed like a flower between the pages of the book, preserved between the covers like a lost piece of history...

As was usual for the TARDIS, she had never been in this room before, despite it being only five corridors from her own roomit was a strange place, even by the TARDIS's eclectically hectic standards, and its decor was more bizarre than usual: a multitude of bits and bobs which Anji

presumed to be from thousands of different cultures and times, trinkets and curios which the Doctor had picked up and never got around to sorting out or chucking away. She shook her head absently, half in awe of the numerous artefacts and half turning up her nose at the tip. *That man has probably never realised how lucky he is to have a*

transcendental home, she thought.

A round paperweight with a small black bubble inside caught her eye from a nearby desk and she found herself lost in a dream where the TARDIS's transcendental stabilisers (or whatever complex name the Doctor might arbitrarily decide to christen the gizmos at any given time) suddenly went kaput. Everything from the console room to the ship's remotest bounds would be suddenly compressed to the barely-larger-than-cupboard-sized volume of its outer shell.

Anji had images of neutron stars and black holes: matter spiralling in to be compressed to mind-bogglingly incredible pressures; colours and forms stretching through space like a flower returning back to its bud; an awesome display of majestic power and intricate beauty. With her squished in the middle.

She looked up apprehensively at the vaulted ceiling and then smiled as she realised that nothing like that would happen. The TARDIS would never allow anything like that to happen. She trusted the

TARDIS, perhaps almost as much as she trusted the Doctor himself. Both integral to her life. Both her closest friends. And both still utterly mysterious.

She craned her head to look around the room. The floor was a cream and brown expanse of chessboard tiles. Motes of dust swam lazily through the air, suspended in the beams of light streaming down from various windows, and made her feel like the room was deep under. the sea. The windows were shaped like a church cloister's and, although she tried, the light was too bright for her to see what was outside. *Perhaps*, she thought sceptically but with the embarrassing excitement of possibility, it's the leviathanry!

To her left were three different-sized wooden book cases arranged in ascending order and beyond them was a curved flight of stairs leading up to a stained-glass window with what looked like a multi-coloured penny-farthing glowing out of its surface. Also at the top of the stairs a landing extended along the side wall of the room; although Anji's view of it was partially obscured by two large columns dropping down from the arched ceiling to the floor, she could see that the banister separating the walkway from the drop to the library floor was in very bad repair. She half-expected to see a couple dressed in rich laces and silks waltzing around her, up the stairs and along the balcony. But then, on her travels with the Doctor, she had come to half-expect to see absolutely anything at any given time, so...

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She crossed to a desk on her right and flicked through the books on its cluttered surface. The choice was very much the Doctor's: *1984*, *The House at Pooh Corner* and something titled *The Schizoid Man*. She sniggered at that and then glanced around guiltily. A large tome was lying already-opened on the desk, its pages held down by a chalky-white harlequin's mask. She lifted the mask and tried it quickly against her face. It didn't fit properly and gave her a feeling of dusty claustrophobia.

She put it back down and read out the large illuminated words in the book.

All relationships are emptying and temporary. Life is wearing me thin.

I feel so drained, my Legacy. A sea of faces just like me...

She sighed and sat back on the table. 'That's nice and cheerful... '

A television screen in a round white sphere was fizzing silently from the middle of the floor. Opposite the screen was a larger white spherical shape, hollowed out to form a chair. To one side of the chair was a pair of small green scales and to the other floated a chessboard. The scales'

two bronze trays lay level with each other although one held a small pile of black powder and the other a considerably larger amount of what tasted to Anji like salt. The pieces on the chessboard were dispersed across the squares in mid-battle.

It was at this moment, with a start that left her slightly dizzy, that Anji noticed out of the corner of her eye something which, even in the TARDIS's chaotic jumble, looked entirely out of place. She put the book down heavily on the table and blinked slowly as the thud reverberated around and around the room. Again, she looked cautiously around and then back towards the item on top of the medium-sized book shelf. Its shape was comforting despite being so angular, it was a shape which Anji recognised instantly and released in her a whole bundle of automatic emotional impulses. But it was disturbing also, somehow completely in shadow although directly in front of one of the windows, and all the more disturbing merely for its very presence. It shouldn't have been there. It just didn't feel quite right. It was too uncomfortably self-conscious. Anji s breathing constricted.

It was a small model of an old, blue, nineteen-sixties police box.

The Doctor had decided that what defined a place best was its smell: everywhere has its own particular fragrance, and he now maintained that this characteristic was far more evocative than any view or sound could possibly be. From between the neutral but quietly clean smell of his cream suit and fedora hat he could follow his nose back through his six previous lives with the greatest of ease:with a single sniff he found himself thrown back centuries to feel vividly what he had felt then, whlle... well, he never had been particularly good with faces or at holding 144

a tune. It annoyed him. He felt he covered up convincingly well, but it annoyed him inside: that split second when he looked an acquaintance in the eyes and felt a void of anonymity beneath him, or the tune he could hear in his head but couldn't make his lips reproduce. He supposed the difficulties he had recognising other peoples' faces stemmed from never quite remembering what to expect when he looked in the mirror at himself. And his desire for musicality was

probably a simple reaction against the legacy of his boorish, multicoloured and tone-deaf

predecessor.

But smells...

Smells seemed never to change. It was strange, but it was only during such nasally inspired flashbacks that he fully transcended the barriers between his different selves: his reaction to smells was subconscious and immediate, and he never knew what to expect or when to expect it. And he rather liked that.

He smiled sadly. He shouldn't like the unexpected: he had spent most of his comparatively long incarnation planning and scheming, making sure he had been at least a few steps further ahead of everyone else, and sometimes even himself. He had felt more self-important than his previous selves, far more conscious of who he was and the role the universe depended on him playing, and perhaps this was why he had always looked back on them with a certain contempt; there was no doubt in his mind that anything *they* could do, *he* could do better... or rather, that anything they *had* done, he *could* have done better...

And so it was with a certain amount of fear that the Doctor submitted to happy nostalgia as he breathed deeply on the bouquet of the Parisian air and so many memories from so long ago flowed unbidden into his mind. (He smiled again, this time sociably, and doffed his hat at a passing onion seller careering down the narrow street on his old bicycle.

The bicycle juddered over the cobblestones making the onions rustle in their skins.) This wasn't the suspenseful fear of hanging off a cliff by the tip of his umbrella. Nor was it the rising fear of being trapped against a cellar door with a Dalek hovering up the stairs towards him. No, this was the fear of the inescapable. A fear which jumped him on dark nights and quickened his pulse rapidly A fear which stalked him quietly and kept his hearts always beating slightly faster than they should. A fear which grew inside him until it absorbed him like a cocoon and he felt as if he could hardly breathe. The tight corner he could never get out of. He knew it was there. And he could feel the fear hiding inside to wait. The deep-rooted fear of unavoidable change. He had done it six times already and could feel it approaching again. *The Doctor is dead! Long live the Doctor!*

But not yet; he still had some things to do.

He reached inside his cream jacket and pulled out a pocket watch, flipping it open and glancing down. He then shut his eyes and steeled his mind as he prepared for

He smiled again, this time sociably, and doffed his hat at a passing onion seller careering down the narrow street on his old bicycle. The bicycle juddered over the cobblestones making the onions rustle in their skins. The smile melted away to be replaced by a darker expression as he reached inside his cream jacket and pulled out a pocket watch, flipping it open and glancing down. He then shut his eyes and steeled his mind as he prepared for the time glitch.

Well, there it went, he thought as he shut the watch and replaced it in his pocket. *Nasty disorienting things. Unless you're prepared for them...*

He felt the anger grow in him once more at the thought of some

maniac playing around so haphazardly with time. When he had been here before he hadn't felt it was so serious. In fact, he seemed to remember that he approached everything from that time of his life with light-hearted affability. Of course, now he realised the true dangers of such ridiculous experiments and he had to dig his toes in between the cobbles to stop himself from storming off now and sorting it all out.

He relaxed as he remembered that his three-times previous self had already done so and it was all under control. So that was one less thing to worry about. Which was nice, he begrudgingly conceded.

If he remembered correctly, he now had roughly two minutes to wait.

In an attempt to pass the time he tried to whistle the Marseillaise, but found Repeatedly that he couldn't get past the first few bars without breaking into 'All You Need Is Love'. He stopped whistling and

frowned. Over three minutes had passed. He looked impatiently again at his pocket watch and then peered cautiously out of the alley only to duck back in immediately as two figures walked by at a brisk pace. The more imposing of the two was a large man dressed in a brown-grey overcoat, with a brown hat atop a mop of unruly curls and a ridiculously long multi-coloured scarf slung casually a number of times about his neck.

Trotting to keep up with his long strides was a woman dressed in what

looked suspiciously like a schoolgirl's uniform, with long blonde hair falling from underneath a boater's hat.

The Doctor waited a further twenty seconds until a man wearing a mustard trench coat with a gun in the pocket had also hurried by. Then he left the cover of the alley and followed the man who was tracking the original strange couple, of whom the girl was the object of the Doctor's quest.

Anji had emptied the shelves and made a staircase from the books. It had pained her to do so but it was the only way she would be able to get to 146

the top of the bookcase. As she reached for the police box, the tower she was on swayed slightly and one of the lower steps fell apart. She grabbed hold of the shelves and steadied herself and her makeshift ladder.

The Doctor always said that books formed the surest foundation for anything Anji or Fitz would ever undertake, and he had never spoken a truer word. Anji had noticed smugly that he had been looking directly at Fitz at the time, although as she lost her footing again and a dust-jacket ripped, she conceded that he would not have found her interpretation very amusing at all.

Oh well, she was now high enough to reach her objective, and did just so, clasping one of the corners of the box and making to pull it towards herself. It refused to move. She yanked at it again, harder, first frustrated by and then rather thankful for the box's immobility as she felt the books rock again beneath her.

Muttering vague curses aimed generally at the Doctor she tapped one of the blue box's sides with her knuckles. It sounded pretty solid. Sighing with the realisation that there was probably nothing special at all about this police box model – it was just a souvenir or memento from some long-past adventure – she rapped disconsolately on the box's doorway.

The circle of metal which covered the door's lock rattled slightly.

Stretching again, with a small smile playing around her mouth, Anji reached up and felt along the flat surface of wood on the top, above the sign which declared the lump of blue wood to be a 'Police Box'. Sure enough, there was a small cubby-hole above the and inside she could feel a sliver of metal. She looked down at her palm and found herself holding a minutely detailed miniature replica of the TARDIS

key.

As she fumbled the key into the lock, Anji could feel her heart beating powerfully in her chest and something inside her rising. Not fear, but something almost as strong. *Expectation*: she was *sure* there was something more to this box...

The door opened slowly and Anji found that she could barely breathe with the excitement, even though she had no real idea why. This box seemed so incongruous, so out of place that... well, it seemed like a symbol of recognition, or some sort of admission on the Doctor's behalf of who he was and what he did. She couldn't understand her thoughts rationally, which irritated her, but she was sure that there was a secret here, that this box was valuable, and inside it was something not only very important, but also something very close to the Doctor, something *special*.

She put her arm forwards into the dark interior of the box and found that despite it being only thirty inches high and fifteen-or-so deep she could push her arm in up to the shoulder and still not feel the opposite wall. Similarly, there was no inside roof to the box, although from the

outside the top was completely solid. She smiled to herself as she realised how accurate this model of the real TARDIS was and pushed herself as far up against the doors as possible, flailing around wildly with her arm inside the box's vast space.

Unsurprisingly, as she clambered to hook her free arm around the back of the police box and haul her body up so that her head was almost through the double doors, the books underneath her gave way and avalanched heavily to the ground, leaving her legs waving briefly in mid-air.

As she began to slip backwards out of the box her hand brushed

something. She grabbed at it half a second before her grip failed and she fell to the floor with a very loud thump and accompanying expletive.

But as she sat up amidst the pile of books which had broken her fall and rearranged her short-sleeved shirt, she smiled triumphantly through her fuzzed-up dark hair at the object of her quest which she clutched in her hand.

It was an A4 file made of moss-green cardboard with a flap at the

front, just like the ones they had used at work before everything had gone totally electrical. With a deep sigh of satisfaction and expectation she tucked some of her hair back behind an ear, settled herself comfortably on the ground, took another large breath and lifted the flap to look inside.

He took a sip from the bone-china teacup and made a face. No matter how much of this stuff he drank, he was never able to persuade his taste-buds to like it: Who on earth had had the idea to invent peppermint tea?

But he forced himself to drink on; he was lonely and the tea had been given to him by a very dear friend. And like a child missing his playmate, he felt that the act of drinking it somehow brought them closer together again.

He had spent hours trying to remember how things had happened in Paris and had decided that he must have lost it somewhere between the Louvre and the café while they were being tailed by that thick-skulled ape of a private detective called Duggan. The Doctor had followed the trio throughout Paris, watching intently his former self's every move as he weaved past people and cars, always – he noted with a pang of something, he wasn't quite sure what – always holding tightly the hand of his companion who half raced, half skipped along beside him.

And then suddenly he saw it: the Doctor had been walking along with his free hand in his coat pocket and now as he removed it to wave cheerfully at a gargoyle peering down at them from the walls of Notre Dame a crumpled piece of paper fell to the ground. Duggan did not notice it – he was a private detective, of course he didn't notice it – but neither did the Doctor, who carried on walking, talking animatedly to his 148

companion. All it took was an instant and he had lost it.

But the Doctor, this thrice latter Doctor was there in an instant, tripping as he scurried over, stooping down and clutching the piece of paper to his breast, oblivious of the annoyed glances of other pedestrians as he crouched awkwardly in their way.

And now he was back in the TARDIS, in his newly redesigned control room, this extravagant gothic vestibule which still smelt funny. He did not feel comfortable here. He put the cup back on its saucer and the echo of the noise it made, the soft touch of china on china, sounded

suspiciously like a noise which said ‘Yet...’

He coughed self-consciously and sat back in the comfy chair. He looked down fondly at the piece of paper in his hand. Absently he reached out for the teacup again and took another sip it tasted nicer, somehow sweeter, than it had before.

What sort of legacy was his?

He was lonely, of that there was no doubt. And he was alone, too. In the end, his friends all left him. They had to, of course, either through their own choice or under the dictates of Time. But he realised that even when they were with him he was alone. ‘Forced to walk in eternity’, he had once said, and it might have been a moment of self-pitying

exaggeration (as that version of him had been annoyingly prone) but he actually hadn’t been far wrong. It certainly seemed that way anyway, because even when he wasn’t alone – when he was accompanied – he couldn’t be himself because he had to be... he *had* to be ‘the Doctor’.

He didn’t notice but the piece of paper was fluttering, moved by the slight shaking of his hands.

Time was his only true companion, and maybe only she knew the real him – the Doctor had been acting someone else for such a long time that even he was unsure who he really was.

For a long time he had revelled in it, but now he realised that the only reward for being truly mysterious was a deep isolation: isolation deeper than mere anonymity deserved, and much darker than his good deeds should have allowed. But that was what he had become: for most that was his attraction, so how could he possibly be anyone different? How could he be any other than the Doctor?

There was an old German proverb, he remembered, which certainly lost something in the translation but went roughly like, ‘Parents who spend their lives ensuring bread for their children and then die of hunger themselves should be hit over the head with a very large stick’...

Well, he had always tried to make sure his children were happy, and, true enough, he *had* been hit over the head on numerous occasions by every sort of variety of large stick, most of them with field-generating-electro-charged-multi-phase knobs on...

And only with one of his companions had he ever felt truly

companionable. Only one had ever tempted him to pack it all in and...

well... simply: only *one* had ever been able to understand him for who he was.

He looked down at the picture again and traced the outline with his fingers.

Only one had ever been like him.

He had seen her again recently and that, combined with what he could feel approaching rapidly, had instilled in him – or rather released, like a butterfly fluttering from its cocoon – this melancholy.

On the console a light started to flash and a small chime sounded. The Doctor looked across at the status display and saw that the ship was about to land. He was on a mission now, another mission to collect a specific object, another thing related to his past. He looked down at the piece of paper. Somehow he felt that both would be deeply relevant to his future too.

As he closed his eyes and took in a single deep breath, the TARDIS

landed with a dull thud. Then he placed the piece of paper carefully inside a hard-backed book at his side, pressing it hard between the pages so it wouldn't get lost, and downed the remains of his drink. Strange how the only thing he could truly embrace with arms open wide was danger...

It was only as he opened the main doors and was walking towards them that he recognised that the pleasant taste in his mouth was that of peppermint tea.

Anji could barely contain her disappointment.

She had opened the folder expecting to find something important, something special, something which would tell her about the hidden past and personality of her mysterious travelling companion.

And all that was here was a tatty piece of paper with a picture on it in pencil: a cracked clock-face framed by long straight hair and a boater's hat. At the bottom of the page a firm but spidery hand had

written. ‘Notre Dame du Temps’.

God, what a disappointment, what an empty and pointless waste of time had all that been?

With a *tut*, she let the folder drop to the floor beside her and walked briskly from the room, slamming the door.

A draught ran through the library and disturbed one of the books perched at the top of the pile which had been Anji’s staircase. It tumbled down and knocked into the folder which in turn skidded across the floor, its flap falling open. As the folder spun to a halt, the piece of paper slid out and carried on moving, coming to a rest only when it hit the square leg of the reading desk.

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It lay there.

It lay there face up.

It lies there for a very long time until one day the Doctor stumbles in by chance, thinking the library to be a billiard room, and sees the mess.

He gazes about with surprise and then confusion. He picks up a book from the floor and looks mournfully at its ripped dust-jacket. He walks across the room, turns off the television, and plumps up the cushions of the chair before he sits down. He looks at the chessboard and moves a white bishop. Having studied the board once again, he puts the bishop where it had been previously and moves a knight. Then he knocks over the black king with a delicate flick of his fingers. Finally, he removes one of the black pawns and perches it on top of the pile of black powder on the scales. The tray sinks to the ground, lifting the white powder into the air. And then he stands up and crosses over to the reading desk.

He stoops carefully and, although he can no longer remember doing so once before, gently picks up the piece of paper. Through the curly locks of his fringe he notices the open book on the table. Without movement he stands for a long time, looking down at the open pages. Then he smiles sadly and turns his gaze again to the portrait. His eyes turn gently curious and he goes to open his lips but can’t quite remember the word he had wanted to say. He frowns with what almost looks like pain and brings the paper up to his face. He breathes in deeply, smelling the paper, and suddenly something in his frown

melts. His single heart beats slightly faster without his realising it. He lowers the paper and scrutinises it again. His expression is still partly quizzical but he lifts the portrait quickly and briefly to his lips before putting it back in the book and closing the heavy tome with a gentleness which belies its strength.

He pauses for a second, his fingers tensing at the cover of the book, almost opening it again, but then he turns and walks to the door. The door clicks shut behind him and then the sound of a key turning in a lock echoes around the roam. There is silence once more as the lights flick off and the library, along with all of its contents, is forgotten in the dark.

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The Little Drummer Boy

Eddie Robson

'Who could become famous with a name like Bing Crosby?' said the man in the chequered suit and bowler hat. The old man with the long white hair nodded.

A few feet away, a small boy stood and watched the two of them. He was intrigued by the tall blue box that stood behind them, though he didn't quite know why. The boy's name was Robert and nobody had spotted him yet. He was on a movie set, from what he could make out.

There were lots of movie people around, but they were all distracted with chasing around after the man in the shirt and tie and the lady with the black hair and black outfit.

More people were gathering. Robert decided that he'd better leave. He vanished.

A little later, the two people who everybody had been chasing entered the blue box. The old man went with them, and the box vanished too.

The studio became even more chaotic. Exasperated, the director threw down his camera script.

'That's it,' he said, turning his back on the pandemonium and heading for the exit. 'I'm through. It's bad enough we gotta work on Christmas Eve...'

An hour later, Sara Kingdom returned to the TARDIS console room to

find the Doctor asleep in the ornate chair in the corner. The other occupant of the time machine, Steven Taylor, stood over the console, having changed out of his shirt and tie and into a sweater and slacks. His hair, ruffled by recent activities, was neatly combed back into its usual coiffure. He glanced up from the instruments at Sara's approach.

'You can get changed, if you like,' Steven said. 'The TARDIS has plenty of clothes.'

Sara looked down at herself, clad in the black, streamlined uniform of the Space Security Service, the uniform she'd been wearing since she joined the Doctor and Steven in the TARDIS.

Sara just felt that she wanted something to remain constant, at least for 152

a while. Although she presented a clinical facade, she was emotionally exhausted by the stress of recent events. Having initially been told that these two men threatened the safety of the galaxy, she'd then discovered that they were, in fact, probably its only chance of avoiding domination by the Daleks. That had required an adjustment on her part, as had fleeing the Daleks in their company whilst in possession of the taranium core, the power source of the Daleks' Time Destructor.

Then there was the disorienting effect of their recent landings, which had featured such colossal changes of pace and ambience that it almost made her nauseous. Was it always going to be like this?

'No,' she told Steven. 'No, I feel more comfortable as I am.'

Steven raised his eyebrows. 'Suit yourself. It just doesn't look all that comfortable to me.' The atmosphere between them had suddenly become awkward. 'Did you find a room?' he said, changing the subject.

'Yes, thank you,' she said. 'The one just next to this will be fine, if nobody else is using it.'

'No,' said Steven, 'no ones using it.' He turned his attention back to the console.

Sara looked over at the Doctor. 'Does he often do that?' she said, desperate to break the silence.

'Do what?' asked Steven.

‘Fall asleep during flight.’

Steven looked up at the chair in the corner. ‘Not often, no. I don’t think the sherry helped. He doesn’t seem to drink much alcohol.’

‘So he sometimes leaves *you* to fly the TARDIS?’

Steven laughed. ‘No, I can’t fly the TARDIS. I’m not such a bad pilot, even if I say so myself, but it’s way ahead of my time. Yours too, before you get in with some dig about my coming from a primitive era,’ he said, pointedly.

‘I wasn’t going to,’ Sara said, although admittedly she would have been surprised if Steven *had* been able to fly such an advanced craft.

‘Why are you watching the instruments if you can’t fly the ship?’

Well, at first I wanted to learn,’ said Steven, scratching his head. ‘But it’s beyond me. Now, it’s just because I feel better if there’s somebody at the controls, I suppose.’

Sara folded her arms. ‘That doesn’t make much sense.’

‘Maybe not,’ Steven said, and returned his attention to the instruments.

‘So,’ said Sara, aware that this was not going well. ‘Where are we going?’

‘Who knows?’ said the Doctor suddenly. Steven and Sara turned to see him yawn, stretch and rise from his chair. ‘A few more random landings should ensure that we have... shaken off the Daleks, so to speak.’

‘Random landings? I didn’t know there *was* any other kind,’ said 153

Steven.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Sara.

‘Well, we *never* know just where we’re going to land’ replied Steven.

Sara turned to the Doctor. ‘Is that true?’ she asked, her chest tightening with a sting of panic. What if they couldn’t get her home again?

‘Hmm,’ said the Doctor. ‘Sheer poppycock. Pay no attention, my

dear.'

Sara was not entirely convinced, but there were other, more pressing matters. 'It *is* important, though,' she said. 'Everything rests on our keeping the taranium core away from the Daleks. We should be using the most efficient transport available.'

The Doctor rounded on her indignantly, producing the box containing the taranium core from his pocket and gesturing with it. 'My dear lady,'

he said, 'nobody is more aware than I of how important it is to keep hold of this piece of taranium. And the TARDIS is most certainly the most effective escape craft available to us at the present time. Now, do you want to assist us or not?'

'Of course,' Sara replied. 'It's my duty to protect the solar system – to protect the taranium. If I have to come with you to do that, I will.'

'Good,' said the Doctor, satisfied. 'And I should appreciate it if you wouldn't undermine me, my boy,' he said, looking towards Steven. He returned the taranium to his pocket.

Steven nodded, apparently knowing when it was better not to argue.

'Oh, and for your information,' the Doctor added, 'alcohol has only a negligible effect on my constitution, and I have *never* slept though a landing.'

And the TARDIS landed.

The Doctor emerged from the Ship first, followed by Steven and Sara.

They had seen the snowy conditions on the scanner, and accordingly Steven had donned a black overcoat. Sara shivered briefly, but after a few seconds her uniform's temperature regulator adjusted itself to compensate.

Their surroundings were Victorian and picturesque, comprising

narrow streets of three-storey houses. There was a church nearby, and a substantial carpet of snow smothered the ground. The streets were all but empty. The Doctor sniffed.

'Hmm!' he said, nonplussed. 'I had expected the TARDIS to take us further. This can't be more than a few decades earlier than where we

were before.'

'Looks like we're still on Earth, too,' said Steven.

'Yes, I'd say so,' said the Doctor, taking in the clothes and buildings.

'We appear to be in England, probably the 1880s.'

'Not only that,' said Steven, 'But it's Christmas again.' It had only been an hour or so since they had raised a toast to that occasion, not that it meant much inside a time machine.

The Doctor looked around. 'I do believe you're quite correct. Yes, look there,' he said, gesticulating at the trees that were visible in the windows of the surrounding homes. As if on cue, carols became audible from the church. 'Yes, my boy. That's quite a coincidence. Quite a coincidence.'

'I don't believe in coincidences,' said Sara.

'No, my dear,' said the Doctor, 'neither do I. But it's possible that a random landing could have brought us here...'

'Well, since we haven't travelled far,' said Sara, 'shouldn't we leave in case the Daleks have tracked us?'

'Possibly, quite possibly. I should like to find out the exact date, for my own records.'

'Doesn't the TARDIS have a device for working that out?' asked Sara.

'Well, it does, but you see it works in terms of absolute time. I do keep meaning to establish a formula to convert into Earth's local time – it ought to be a simple matter, really...' The Doctor seemed to drift into talking more to himself than anybody else. 'Given the correct data...'

A boy was walking their way; a child of no more than eight years, a Dickensian street urchin straight out of a George Cruickshank

illustration. Under his misshapen hat, his hair was black and his eyes were blue. The Doctor attracted the boy's attention and the boy walked over to them. The Doctor leaned over slightly, to put himself closer to the boy's eye level.

'Tell me, boy.' said the Doctor, 'what day is this?'

The boy smiled. ‘Why, sir,’ he said, ‘it’s Christmas Day.’

‘I see,’ the Doctor replied. ‘And, er, could you tell me the year?’

The boy looked amused, but asked no questions. ‘It’s 1885, sir,’ he told them, and went on his way.

‘Thank you, young man!’ the Doctor called after him

A few minutes later, the boy stood in a shop doorway and watched the TARDIS slowly disappear.

A short while after that, he disappeared, too.

Four landings later, the Doctor was perplexed. The TARDIS had taken them to Christmases and Christmas Eves in 1982, 1946, 1931 and now a small Sussex village in 2069. Steven and Sara were still outside, but the Doctor had returned to the Ship to work on some calculations.

The Doctor looked up from his sheaf of notes, removed his glasses and shook his head. ‘No, it’s no good,’ he said. ’I can’t see it. I can’t see it at 155

all.’

The doors opened and Steven and Sara returned.

‘Well, Doctor?’ Steven asked.

‘No, my boy, I’m afraid I can’t work it out,’ the Doctor replied. ‘Ever since I started feeding the TARDIS with random co-ordinates, we’ve been landing on Earth on Christmas Day – or just before it. And, other than that, I can see no pattern to the landings.’

‘What can we do?’ asked Sara.

‘As far as I can see, my dear, there isn’t a great deal that we can do,’

replied the Doctor. ‘As you yourself said before, we must keep moving in order to evade the Daleks, so...’

He operated the dematerialisation switch.

Steven stepped out of the TARDIS into a cold, grey atmosphere. The landscape was instantly familiar, though this was the first time he had seen it for himself. The TARDIS stood in a narrow ditch with muddy sides, and around the edge he could see barbed wire and rotting

debris.

Instinctively, he expected to hear the sound of gunfire, but now that he actually listened for it, there was none. More than that, though. There was the unexpected sound of cheering, and voices singing.

Steven turned to see that the Doctor had joined him outside the Ship.

‘Where are we, Doctor? I mean I know what it looks like, but...’

The Doctor sighed. ‘I’m afraid that I think it’s exactly what it looks like. Come along, let s make sure.’ He climbed out of the ditch, with a little help from Steven. ‘Thank you, my boy. Yes – look.’ He gestured with his cane.

The slaughter of the trenches of the First World War was an image that had easily resonated down the four centuries to Steven’s time. He’d expected to see tentative men keeping their heads below the tops of the trenches, a deadly impasse. He hadn’t expected to see the opposing forces mingling in the middle of No Man’s Land, talking as best they could in spite of the language barrier, and sharing cigarettes. A sizeable group, down in one of the dugouts, was the source of the singing that Steven had heard. There was even a game of football taking place between the enemy trenches.

‘Christmas Day, 1914,’ the Doctor said, before Steven could ask. He didn’t look at Steven, but at the soldiers. ‘The two armies here have been attempting to destroy each other for months. Today, they changed their minds.’ He took a deep breath. ‘But tomorrow...’ His statement shied away from the inevitable. ‘And I can’t change that. But I should like to speak to them.’

He paced ahead. Steven followed.

* * *

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Sara left the TARDIS, chewing the last chuck of the nutrient bar that she’d stopped to obtain from the food machine. She climbed up out of the ditch.

‘Doctor?’ she called. ‘Steven?’ Sara surveyed the landscape, looking for her companions amongst the figures in the mud. She berated herself for not following directly after them. It didn’t look safe out here, and

she should be covering their backs.

After a minute or two, she saw them. The Doctor was talking to some of the locals, whilst Steven had joined some of the men in kicking and chasing a spherical object back and forth. Sara assumed this to be some form of ritual exercise. Relieved that they appeared to be safe, Sara debated what she should do in the meantime.

'Bang,' said a voice behind her.

Sara spun around to see a boy, no more than eight years old, dressed in a uniform like those worn by the men in this place. It was a little too large for him; the trousers were rolled up above his boots and the tin helmet obscured his eyes. He brandished a toy gun at her. Sara

recognised him as the boy to whom the Doctor had spoken in 1885. That shouldn't have been possible, though. He should have been much older by now. Perhaps, she considered, he simply resembled the other child.

'Bang,' he said again, clicking the trigger of his toy. 'You're dead.'

No, it was definitely the same boy. Even the voice was the same. Sara crouched down to speak to him.

'Hello,' she said. She wasn't really used to speaking to children, so she tried not to make it sound too much like an interrogation. 'Who are you?'

'I'm Robert, ' said the boy. 'Who are you?'

'My name's Sara.'

'Well, you're dead,' said Robert. 'Lie down. '

'I'd – rather not,' said Sara, looking down. 'It's very muddy.'

Robert looked at her, sulkily. 'All right. But you *are* dead. It's the rules.'

'All right,' said Sara. 'I'm dead. Robert... what are you doing here?'

Robert ignored the question and looked at her clothes. 'I remember you. I've seen you before, in lots of places, but you didn't see me,' he said, proudly. 'You're a soldier, aren't you? You're not like them –' he gestured at the men on the battlefield – 'but you're a soldier too.' Sara was about to reply, but Robert simply continued. 'And this isn't your

time. I learned about this time at school. The British are fighting the Germans. Who do you fight?'

Sara was a little taken aback by the boy's apprehensions. 'Er, I fight the Daleks.' She knelt down and asked again, 'Robert, why are you here?'

Robert smiled at her. 'Because it's Christmas,' he said.

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Then he vanished.

'Very good, my boy! Excellent!' called the Doctor, as Steven performed a neat sliding tackle. The Doctor had spent a little time talking to the soldiers, but their optimism made him uneasy. He didn't want to stretch his cover story – that he was a minister from the War Office – too far, either, although everybody seemed too jubilant to question his presence.

Instead, he had decided to watch the football.

The Doctor felt a tap on his shoulder. He started, and turned to see that Sara was standing behind him

'Oh, my dear young lady,' he said, 'could you please refrain from creeping up on me like that!'

'I'm sorry, Doctor,' Sara replied, urgently, 'but do you remember that boy we talked to in 1885?'

'Well of course I do, but what about him.'

'Doctor, he's here! I've just seen him! And he was still a boy, he didn't seem to have aged at all!'

The Doctor placed a hand on her shoulder. 'What? Are you sure?'

'Yes, Doctor. He recognised me from before.'

'But this is almost thirty years later... Where is he?'

'Well, that's just it. He disappeared.'

The Doctor sighed. 'Good heavens, how remiss of you, letting him wander off like that. Space Security Agent, indeed...'

‘No, Doctor, I mean really disappeared, before my eyes. They didn’t have transmats in this time, did they?’

‘Oh. No, my dear, they most certainly did not. It would seem logical to assume that he is travelling though time... and if he is, we can track him.

But we must hurry.’ The Doctor glanced over his shoulder. ‘Fetch Steven. We must return to the TARDIS.’

Having, changed out of his muddied clothes, Steven returned to the console room. The Doctor and Sara were both staring at the scanner, which displayed the readout from the Time Path Indicator. ‘How are we doing?’ Steven asked, joining them. ‘Have you found him?’

‘It’s interesting, my boy,’ the Doctor said. ‘It seems that we have not, in fact, been making random landings, but have been tracking a distress call from a time ship of some kind. And it has just left France in 1914, where Sara saw our young friend.’

‘And has the TARDIS been following the other ship to all these places without our knowing?’ said Sara. ‘How?’

The Doctor looked abashed. ‘Yes. Perhaps... perhaps the TARDIS

isn’t communicating as well as it should... leaving me to discover these things for myself... yes...’

Steven and Sara exchanged puzzled looks. ‘What do you mean,

Doctor?’ asked Steven.

‘What?’ said the Doctor. ‘Oh, never mind, my boy, never mind. The point is, this is a distress call, and I think we should answer it, don’t you?’ He returned his attention to the Indicator. ‘Hmm! Our companion in the vortex appears to be landing.’

Robert had arrived in 1956, in a cold street in Manchester. He’d just been thinking about where he wanted to go when an elderly woman had

stopped to talk to him. She’d asked Robert where his parents were.

Robert had said that he didn’t know. She’d asked him where he lived.

Nowhere, really, he'd said. The woman had given him a mournful look, then she'd taken him by the hand and led him through the streets.

The place she'd taken him to was full of children. Robert had been in places like this before. They gave food and presents to children who didn't have anybody else to give them those things. The kind old lady had given Robert a drum. Now, he sat happily in the corner of the room, playing his drum and watching the other children play party games.

Christmases like this were his favourite.

'Robert,' said a voice he recognised. He looked up from his drum to see the soldier lady. The two men – the old one and the young one –

were with her. He'd been expecting them to turn up soon.

The old man stepped towards him. 'Robert, is it? That's a fine drum you have there.'

Robert nodded.

'You, er, travel in time. Am I correct?'

'Yes,' said Robert.

'Yes,' said the old man. 'Who with? Who decides where you go?'

'I do. There's just me,' said Robert.

'And where is your time machine? Could I see it?' asked the old man.

Robert couldn't see any harm in showing the old man. After all, nobody had ever asked before. 'All right.'

The Doctor, Steven and Sara stepped back in surprise. It was difficult to describe exactly what was happening to Robert. He'd put his drum down.

Then, his face and chest had begun to open up. The space in the middle of him became wider as he slowly unfolded. Sara had instinctively looked away, expecting the hole to reveal the boy's internal organs. On catching a brief glimpse, however, she realised that there was nothing in the space. It was all blackness. When it had stopped expanding, the blackness faded into an image of a small grey room.

Sara blinked.

Edgily, she moved to the boy's side and looked past the opening. On 159

the other side, Robert was still there – well, most of him, anyway. Sara looked back to the Doctor and Steven. Steven put out a tentative hand to the image.

'Careful, my boy,' said the Doctor.

Steven's hand went straight through, with no resistance, 'I think it's a doorway,' he said.

Sara turned to see a middle-aged woman at her shoulder. Beyond her, the children had stopped playing, and were staring at the time travellers and the strange doorway that had opened up where Robert had been.

'Excuse me...' the woman said, shakily. 'Who are you? What... what are you *doing*?'

'Don't worry, madam, don't worry.' said the Doctor, waving her

away. 'We shall deal with this.' He turned back to the doorway.

'What do you think, Doctor?' asked Steven. 'Is it safe?'

The Doctor put his hand to his mouth. 'Yes, I think... I do believe...

Robert *is* the time machine.'

'What?' said Steven. 'You mean...'

'Yes.' said the Doctor. He lifted his feet over the bottom of the doorway and stepped inside.

Steven followed the Doctor, as did Sara. Behind them, the 'door' folded back up, leaving them in a small anteroom. There was another, more conventional door ahead of them, which the Doctor opened. The three of them emerged into a room that was white and spacious. There was nothing inside, barring a large, transparent cylindrical tank that emerged from the floor and reached up to the ceiling. There were a number of controls around the outside of the tank, but the observer's attention was immediately drawn to the figure inside, suspended in a light blue fluid.

Wires trailed from the ceiling of the tank and were attached to his cranium. The man was dressed in a kind of white, all-over body stocking and his eyes were closed. He appeared to be in his late thirties, perhaps his early forties.

Sara looked around. 'What... ? Is he a prisoner?' she said, pointing at the man in the tank.

'No,' said the Doctor. 'No, I believe he's the pilot. I recognise the principle – he controls the ship with his mind.' He moved over to inspect the controls.

'Do you understand them at all, Doctor?' Steven asked.

'Mmm,' said the Doctor. 'I can't be completely sure of them, of course, but I wish to speak to our friend here, and establish why he sent that distress call.' The Doctor pointed to a switch that was picked out in red. 'And I believe this to be a release mechanism for that contraption.'

'Are you sure?' Sara asked. 'If his brain is linked in to that, you might
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damage him if you do the wrong thing.'

'My dear young lady, I am entirely confident, and besides, I wish to get to the bottom of this. Stand back.' He operated the switch.

The three of them watched as the fluid drained from the tank. The man inside slumped against the glass wall. Then, the tank retracted partway into the ceiling, the wires popping out of the man's head as it went. He was left lying on the floor, taking juddering breaths as he regained consciousness.

Sara moved to his side. Without the distortion of the fluid, she realised that there was something familiar about him. 'Are you all right?' she asked.

'Now, my dear, let's give him a chance to recover before we start bombarding him with questions,' said the Doctor.

The man opened his eyes. 'Yes, Sara, I'm fine,' he said.

Sara was taken aback. 'How do you know my name?'

The man looked hurt. 'You told me it. Don't you remember?'

Sara's eyes widened. He was thirty years older, at least, but she could see this was the little boy she'd talked to in France. The one with the door in his head. Robert.

She turned to the Doctor. 'Doctor? What *is* going on?'

The Doctor moved closer 'So, Robert. Why did you send the distress call, hmm?'

HE DIDN'T, said a disembodied female voice. I DID.

In the corner of the room, Sara talked quietly to Robert, who was in a state of some confusion. Steven divided his attention between those two and the Doctor, who was holding a conversation with the voice of the ship. Naturally, the first thing the Doctor had done was to ask Robert's ship how she worked.

THE PILOT STANDS IN THE CONTROL BOOTH, she said, as though reading from the operator's manual, AND HIS MIND LINKS WITH ME DIRECTLY. HE

CAN BE SUSTAINED IN THERE INDEFINITELY. MY EXTERIOR THEN ALTERS TO

RESEMBLE THE PILOT, AND THE SCANNER FEEDS IMAGES AND OTHER

SENSATIONS INTO HIS MIND AS THOUGH HE WAS EXPERIENCING THEM FIRST

HAND.

'Ah!' said the Doctor. 'I suspected the principles of the control system.

But to alter the exterior in such a way – that's very clever! Yes, very clever! So, you're halfway between a vehicle, and a sort of suit, I suppose.'

INDEED.

And huddled in the corner all Robert could think was that this was how he'd felt the day after Christmas, the day when Christopher, his twin brother, went away.

He and Christopher did everything together and they liked the same things.

Robert knew that other children didn't have this and he felt lucky.

But in the months leading up to that Christmas, their house hadn't been happy at all. His mum had cried a lot and his dad had been very quiet.

Worst of all, Christopher hadn't wanted to play as much, hadn't been going to school, hadn't been doing much of anything. But they all had a really good Christmas that year and Robert thought things were back to normal. It was like he'd been taught at school. Christmas was special.

The next day Christopher went away, and he never came back.

'Who built you?' Steven asked the time machine 'Where did you come from?'

I WAS NOT PROVIDED WITH THAT INFORMATION. THEY ARE, HOWEVER,

OF A RACE, SIGNIFICANTLY MORE ADVANCED THAN ROBERT'S. HIS BRAIN IS

SIMPLER THAN THOSE WITH WHICH I AM DESIGNED TO BE COMPATIBLE.

'So, why did you send the distress call?' asked the Doctor. 'You've led us a merry dance, and I should hope for a good reason.'

I AM AN EXPERIMENTAL MODEL. DURING AN EARLY TEST FLIGHT, A

FAULT EMERGED. WHEN A MIND WAS INTERFACED WITH MY SYSTEMS,

NEURAL FEEDBACK WAS GENERATED, LOCKING BOTH THE PILOT AND

MYSELF INTO A REPEATED PATTERN OF RESPONSES. THE PILOT EJECTED

BEFORE HE BECAME LOCKED, LEAVING ME ADRIFT IN THE VORTEX. I

LANDED ON EARTH, 16 MAY, 1966.

Dad left in the spring, and he didn't come back either. Robert asked his mum if he'd gone to the same place as Christopher. She shook her head, cuddled him tightly and told him to be quiet.

One Sunday Robert came into the kitchen to find his mum in a weird position on the floor, lying very still. He wondered if she was asleep but her eyes were open. One of the white bottles that she'd always told him never to touch was on the floor next to her, open, the pills spilled across the floor. All was silent except for the radio.

Confused, Robert decided to go outside and come back later. He knew that something was wrong but he wasn't sure what to do. He went to his thinking-place at the bottom of the garden.

When he got there, he found a smooth white box, a bit like a fridge.

Robert looked over his shoulder, then opened the door.

* * *

'Why didn't you warn him off?' Steven asked.

STANDARD PROCEDURE WHEN ABANDONED IS TO SHUT DOWN UNTIL

RECOVERED. BY THE TIME I WAS OPERATIONAL, ROBERT HAD ALREADY

CLIMBED INTO THE CONTROL BOOTH. MY CREATORS CONSIDERED THAT IT

WOULD BE DANGEROUS FOR ME TO BE ABLE TO OVERRIDE THE PILOT. THEY

DID NOT, HOWEVER, FORESEE THE FAULT THAT HAD DEVELOPED. WITHIN

MINUTES, THE FEEDBACK LOCKED US IN TO A PATTERN THAT WE HAVE

REPEATED EVER SINCE.

'What pattern?' asked Steven.

The box told Robert that it could take him anywhere that he wanted.

Robert hadn't been happy since Christmas. Christmas was the only place that he wanted to go.

WITH HIS MIND LOCKED LIKE THAT, HE NEVER WANTED ANYTHING ELSE. I WAS AWARE OF THE PROBLEM BUT COULD NOT GO AGAINST HIS WISHES. I COULD ONLY SIGNAL FOR HELP FROM OUTSIDE.

Steven turned to the corner of the room. Robert was looking down at his body, bewildered. ‘And with his mind locked, he never grew up,’ said Steven. ‘He still thought of himself as being a child.’

‘And so, whilst “wearing” the time ship, he still looked like one,’ said the Doctor. ‘He looks a great deal older, now. You must have been waiting for quite some time.’

THIRTY-TWO YEARS, EIGHT MONTHS, THREE WEEKS, SIX DAYS AND

FOURTEEN HOURS, said the time ship. I HAVE DAMAGED HIS NATURAL

DEVELOPMENT. THE SAME MAY HAPPEN TO SOMEBODY ELSE IF YOU LEAVE

ME UNATTENDED. IT WOULD BE SAFER IF YOU DESTROYED ME ENTIRELY.

‘Oh, I don’t think that will be necessary,’ said the Doctor. ‘I’m sure that there must be some way of returning you to your point of origin...’

he tailed off into a mutter. ‘Something like a Fast Return Switch... hmm.’

‘What about Robert?’ asked Sara. ‘What are we going to do with

him?’

The Doctor turned towards Robert. ‘I don’t know. I simply don’t know.’

The Doctor stared at Robert for a few seconds, so to avoid suspicion, Robert stared at the floor. When the Doctor turned away again, Robert looked up. He felt drawn to the old man’s jacket pocket. No, it was something *in* the pocket. Whatever it was, he had to have it. Robert slid across the floor, away from Sara, certain that nobody could see him. He reached up, lifted the object out of the Doctor’s pocket and dashed back to the corner of the room, satisfied.

‘What – give that back this instant, young man!’ the Doctor demanded, rounding on Robert.

‘What is that?’ asked Steven. ‘What’s he holding?’ Whatever it was,

Robert was holding it close to his chest.

‘It’s the taranium,’ the Doctor said. ‘That young man has the

taranium!’

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Sara, who was closest to Robert, was the first to notice the ringing sound that emanated from his direction. ‘What’s that sound?’ she asked.

‘My dear, I –’ the Doctor began, but broke off when he too identified the noise.

‘I think its coming from the taranium,’ Steven said. This was borne out as a glow also began to emanate from Roberts hands. Sara stepped back.

It was diffrcult to discern any change at first. But, after a few seconds, Robert’s skin had noticeably smoothened and his figure had become a little gaunter. Then the change seemed to accelerate, as he underwent puberty in reverse. His body shrank unevenly, eventually resolving itself into the form of Robert as they had first seen him, the eight-year-old boy who had first stepped into the time ship. Then, the glow and the ringing faded. Robert took his eyes off the core and let it fall from his grasp. Sara picked it up. It seemed undamaged.

Robert looked around. ‘Where are we going next?’

The Doctor asked Robert about his family and where he’d come from, then consulted with the time machine. Then he ushered Steven and Sara into a corner to speak to them.

‘So what do we do, Doctor?’ Steven asked. ‘Try to get him back to his own time? Find a family who can take care of him?’

‘A foster home, perhaps,’ suggested Sara.

‘Yes, yes,’ said the Doctor. ‘That was my first thought, too. But I think... yes, I think I have another idea. I must warn you, though, that it is a little ambitious.’

‘Go on, Doctor,’ said Steven.

The Doctor grasped his lapels. ‘The first Christmas on which we landed was 1965. The day before Robert’s poor young brother passed

away. Now, it also seems that the *place* on Earth where we landed was very close to Robert's home.' He pointed at the central column. 'The machine tells me that he would often choose to go there, due to its particular signifrcance for him. Do you both follow me so far?'

Steven and Sara nodded.

'Good. Now, whilst I would not ordinarily be confident of getting Robert back to his *exact* time and place...' He directed a stern look at Steven, who affected an air of complete innocence... 'I *can* use the Fast Return Switch, which will return the TARDIS to each of its previous landing sites and take us back to Christmas 1965.'

'And from there we could use it to go back to 4000!' Sara exclaimed, a little more loudly than she would have liked.

'I'm afraid not, Miss Kingdom,' the Doctor replied. 'The Fast Return Switch is not to be used lightly, and besides, it would return us to the *precise* time and place that we left. The Daleks would be upon us in no 164

time at all!'

'What do you mean, it's not to be used lightly?' asked Steven. 'Is it dangerous?'

'It has malfunctioned before, and for that reason I try to avoid its use,'

admitted the Doctor. He turned to glance at Robert. 'But for what I have in mind I think it will be worthwhile.'

Robert had watched the old man send Robert's time machine back to where it came from, then all four of them had got into the Doctor's own machine. Steven had told him to watch the big screen up on the wall, and whilst the Doctor operated the controls they'd watched seven different Christmases fade in and out of view. An eighth appeared and this, the one that Robert recognised better than any other, remained.

A short walk later and Robert stood in his own back garden once more. His home was exactly as he remembered it, except that it was the middle of the night (he had never been allowed up this late) and Sara was standing next to him She crouched down to his eye level.

'You understand that we'd like to bring Christopher back,' Sara said.

‘But we can’t.’

Robert nodded. ‘Because he was taken by Luke Eymia.’

Sara took a deep breath. ‘Yes. But you can make everybody much

happier.’ She pointed at the house. ‘We’ve come back to the night that Christopher went away. Your parents are still there. And so are you –

now that we’ve brought you back here, there are two of you.’ Robert nodded, then Sara continued. ‘Well, why don’t *you* pretend to be Christopher? You look just the same. Nobody will ever know.’

Robert considered it. It was a strange idea, but if Sara said it would work, then he believed her. ‘I could.’

The Doctor walked out of the bushes at the bottom of the garden and joined them. ‘It’s done,’ he said to Sara. Then to Robert, ‘Has Miss Kingdom explained it all to you?’

Robert nodded.

‘Good,’ the Doctor told him, eyes twinkling. ‘It’s a good thing that you’re doing. Now, Christopher has gone – you should take his place before your parents notice. You just remember two things. Don’t climb into any more white boxes. And never tell *anyone*.’

Robert nodded, said goodbye and walked back to the house. The next time he turned, the Doctor and Sara had gone.

As Robert reached the back door, the kitchen light came on. Mum was in the kitchen looking worried (he hadn’t seen her in *so* long, but he didn’t show it). She let out a small cry of relief when Robert walked through the back door.

‘Oh, Christopher,’ she said, bending down to cuddle him. ‘I saw you
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weren’t in your bed. Where have you been? You shouldn’t be wandering outside.’

‘I didn’t feel well,’ Robert – now Christopher – replied. ‘I feel better now.’

In a few weeks, Christopher’s parents would take him in for further tests, noting that his condition had improved. His doctors, having diagnosed Christopher’s cancer as terminal, would be amazed to

discover that it had vanished. They would beg the parents to let them study the child further, and be refused. Christopher, they would say, just wanted to go home and play with his brother.

'But how can it *work*?' Steven asked back in the TARDIS. 'Surely now Robert never leaves in the time machine, so we never meet him and never take him back to 1965. '

'Robert has crossed his own time track,' the Doctor explained. 'He is changing history by replacing Christopher, and in so doing he has become what you might call an anomaly, a remnant of a timeline that will now never happen. He shouldn't exist – ' the Doctor spread his hands – 'but he does!'

'Right,' said Steven, still a little puzzled. 'But isn't that changing history?'

The Doctor glanced at him. 'In a manner of speaking, but...'

'Haven't you always said that we shouldn't, not under any

circumstances?'

'I have, but the intervention of the other time machine had already disrupted the natural path of causality...' The Doctor smiled slightly.

'Trust me, my boy.'

'Okay, Doctor. As long as you think it'll work: Steven gestured at Christopher, who lay on a small couch in the corner of the console room with Sara at his side. 'What about him?'

'We can't do much for him, I'm afraid,' the Doctor said sadly. 'He'll miss out on so much of life...'He turned back to Steven. 'I think he deserves just one grand experience.'

And so the last sight that Christopher ever saw was a dusty red landscape that was like something from one of his space adventure comics, only more so. The old man pointed to a light in the sky full of stars and told him that was the Earth, a pinprick that burned itself on to his eyes just before they closed forever.

Hidden Talent

Andrew Spokes

I

The girl looked out at the crowd. The looks on their faces didn't give much away. They were applauding, but then they *always* applaud, don't they? She suddenly realised that the host of the show was standing next to her. He put a friendly arm around her and grinned at the camera. 'Well, what about that for a performance? Knockout! And if we look at the star rating... 74 per cent! That guarantees you a place in the final.

In her dressing room, Jo looked at herself in the mirror. A heavily made-up face streaked with glitter stared back. She had to admit that she'd enjoyed the attention and dressing up, but was still a little uneasy about the experience. Her thoughts were disturbed by a knock at the door. 'Come in,' she called.

A familiar face appeared. 'Well done, Jo.' said the Doctor.

'I thought I was a little flat.'

'The audience didn't think so. Anyway, the important thing is that you didn't get knocked out.'

'Important for you,' replied Jo, a little indignantly.

The Doctor rubbed his neck thoughtfully. 'Yes, well... I could hardly go on stage and do my Venusian lullabies now, could I?'

This brought a smile to Jo's face at last. 'Not really, Doctor – you'd stand out a bit amongst all these youngsters.'

'You are happy to carry on, aren't you? I want to get to the bottom of these disappearances.' The Doctor looked concerned.

Jo sighed. 'I think so. I'm not looking forward to staying in this hotel though. I know its part of the show, but some of the other contestants are a bit.'

'Intense?' The Doctor nodded his understanding. 'Well, you are on *Make A Star*. It means a lot to some people to be famous, you know.

Just do your best to mix in with the others, find out what you can, and we'll meet up tomorrow. All I'm asking you to do is make an

exhibition of yourself and get into a little trouble perhaps. You don't

usually find that too difficult.'

Jo looked up at the Doctor's grinning features and smiled back.

'Okay, Doctor. I know how many strings you had to pull to get me on this talent show. What if I get into *real* trouble though?'

'Well, I've knocked up this little device. Here.' The Doctor passed what appeared to be a small brooch to Jo. 'It's a simple radio

transmitter. Flick the switch underneath and it will send me a signal.

I'll come for you via the TARDIS or Bessie, whichever is quicker?

'That'll be Bessie then.'

Jo looked around the bedroom that she'd been assigned in the hotel.

Peeling wallpaper, damp flourishing in the corner by the look of it, and a rather lurid green carpet. The beds didn't exactly look comfortable either. Still, she'd only be here for a couple of days – the final of the show was to be Sunday night's big TV event. She'd be rehearsing all day tomorrow and wanted to get some sleep, but remembered what the Doctor had said about getting information out of people. The tall, blonde girl with whom she was sharing the room hadn't exactly been forthcoming so far, though. In fact she hadn't said a word during the trip from the TV studio to the hotel. Come to think of it, neither had anyone else really, except the well-spoken West Indian chauffeur who had driven the limousine.

Jo remembered from the brief introductions she'd been given earlier that this girl was called Lucy Wilkins. As the pair began to get ready for bed Jo tried to strike up a conversation.

'Not exactly the Ritz in here, is it?'

'You haven't been here as long as I have. After six weeks you get used to it. Anyway, I'm prepared to make the sacrifice to become a star.'

'Are they all like you here? Obsessed about being famous, I mean.'

Lucy glanced pityingly at Jo. 'I'm not obsessed. I know I'll be a star even if I don't win the final.' Jo didn't doubt that she would achieve her goal with the model looks she had.

Lucy got up and turned off the light. Jo thought this was probably a pretty big hint that she'd had enough, but she wanted to find out

more.

She sat on the bed, wrapping her arms around her knees, and peered at Lucy through the semi-darkness.

‘What about the disappearances though? Doesn’t that make you

scared?’

‘People get voted off. It’s part of the show. You wouldn’t be here if that didn’t happen. I don’t know how you got in anyway on tonight’s performance. Your dad got friends in high places has he?’

‘My dad?!’ said Jo incredulously, then realised that Lucy meant the Doctor. Lucy was staring at her now, and thinking that maybe she had been partly rumbled, Jo quickly changed the subject. ‘What about the host? He seems a bit slimy.’

‘Bob Leezley? The only thing really offensive about him is his dress sense.’

Jo laughed, feeling a little more comfortable again. ‘He did have a terrible suit on today, didn’t he? What about the people behind the show – do you see much of them?’

‘Not really; we’ve not even seen the Producer. Apparently he sits in his office upstairs while the show is going out. They never come round here, if that’s what you mean – apart from the limousine driver. He brings us here and takes away the contestants who’ve been voted off, after they’ve collected their things.’

‘And you never see them again?’

‘No,’ replied Lucy tersely.

Trying to appear casual, Jo stretched out on the bed, fluffing up her pillow before resting her head on it. ‘The problem is that no one ever sees them again,’ she said.

Lucy sat up suddenly. ‘Look? Are you with the police or something?

That’s it, your Dad’s a Chief Inspector, isn’t he?’

Jo thought about the TARDIS exterior and stifled a giggle. ‘No, not exactly,’ she said.

‘There’s more to you than meets the eye, I know that. Ah well, I’m not bothered. You’ve not got a serious chance of winning, that’s all I care.’ Lucy lay down again and closed her eyes.

‘Charming. You must have a rival or two though.’

‘The papers say that Chris Summers is a dead cert.’

Jo tried to recall which one Chris was. All the boys looked very similar, but she was pretty sure that he was the one with short dark hair and a cute nose. She asked Lucy.

‘That’s the one. He doesn’t say much. You can maybe try getting something out of him tomorrow, if you want to continue your

“investigations”,’ said Lucy.

‘All right, I can take a hint,’ replied Jo. She was about to shut her eyes when she saw something at the foot of Lucy’s bed that she hadn’t noticed before.

‘What’s that?’ she squealed, pointing at the object.

Lucy huffed and squinted down the line of Jo’s outstretched finger to see what had startled her. ‘It’s just a doll. Didn’t they tell you? When you get voted off they mass-produce loads of them. That’s Matt, the first one who got kicked out. Now go to sleep.’

Jo couldn’t take her eyes away from the gaze of the inert figure, its

eyes caught in the yellow shaft of artificial light that crept between the curtains. She turned over to face the wall, yet still thought she could feel its icy stare piercing into her back. With a shiver she pulled the covers tight around her.

The black limousine dropped the *Make A Star* contestants outside the door of the TV studios. Jo looked around, and clocked the distinctive shape of Bessie in the car park. The Doctor had arranged to meet up with her at the first break in rehearsals. She wanted to have a quick word with him now, but he was nowhere to be seen. ‘Hope he’s not getting himself into trouble again,’ she thought, and she knew that he was probably disappointed that she hadn’t had to use her radio

transmitter brooch so he could rush to her rescue. She checked in her pocket to make sure that it was there though, just in case.

They weren't rehearsing in costume to start with, so Jo and the others filed straight into the rehearsal room and waited for instructions. She was disappointed that she hadn't been able to find out anything useful over breakfast that morning, so now she walked over to where Chris was sitting. 'Hello. Feeling confident about tomorrow?' she asked.

'I'm never confident,' replied Chris.

'Oh, why not? I may be new to all this, but I know you've got a great voice.'

'Are you trying to chat me up? The others have already tried that, you know. I have enough screaming young girls after me, thanks.'

Jo grabbed a chair and sat down next to him. She put her elbows on her lap and rested a hand against her cheek, angling her head slightly.

'Yes, I noticed that last night,' she said, 'I'm not trying to chat you up by the way, just being friendly.' Chris gazed at Jo's smile and relaxed a little.

'Sorry, I'm just a little nervous. I'll be glad when this is over.'

'Don't you want to win? You sound as if you don't.'

'I love singing. I'm just not sure that I want to be famous.'

Jo laughed. 'Well if Lucy is anything to go by, the others are all absolutely desperate to be famous.'

'They're in it for the fame and money. I'm not. Anyway, I've got extra pressure on me to succeed.'

'Parents?' Jo asked.

'How did you guess?'

'You wouldn't be the first talent show contestant to have

domineering parents.'

'Well, it looks like I'll win, so they'll get what they want,' said Chris grumpily.

'I thought you said you weren't confident?'

‘I’m not, it’s just... I always seem to get the best songs. It’s as if they *want* me to win.’

‘Really?’ pondered Jo, feeling as if she was finally getting

somewhere.

As arranged, during the break Jo met up with the Doctor in the canteen.

He was nursing a cup of tea and looking thoughtful. Jo waved her hand in front of his face.

‘What on earth are you doing, Jo?’ he asked.

‘Trying to disturb that important train of thought you were on,’ she said.

‘I was just wondering why these places are incapable of making a good hot drink.’

‘Important stuff then? Good job I’ve been doing all the work on this one, isn’t it?’

The Doctor looked hurt and then raised an eyebrow. ‘Whilst you’ve been busy “singing” I’ve been having a look around the offices, as well you know.’

Jo smirked at this. ‘Found anything out?’

The Doctor rubbed his cheek and looked sheepish. ‘Not really, no.

Nothing untoward anyway. How about you?’ he asked expectantly.

‘My room-mate, Lucy, is very snooty and intensely ambitious and Chris thinks the programme makers are being favourable to him, that’s about all don’t see how either of those two – or any of the contestants –

could be responsible for the disappearance of the ones who’ve been voted off though. Why would they get rid of someone who’s no longer a rival?’

‘I’m hoping they haven’t been “got rid of” completely, Jo... though I fear that may be the case.’

The Doctor seemed to be lost in thought again and was staring at the

table now. At times like this, Jo thought, he somehow looked terribly old. ‘There is one thing,’ Jo piped up. ‘My fellow contestants don’t seem to have met the Producer of the show. Don’t you think that’s odd?’

‘Perhaps. We’d better find out, don’t you think?’ asked the Doctor.

‘How do you find your way around this building so easily, Doctor? I got lost several times this morning. All these grey walls, long corridors –’

‘You know me, Jo. In-built sense of direction,’ the Doctor

interrupted. He didn’t seem to notice Jo’s small snort of derision and marched on towards the Producer’s door. He tried the handle.

‘Locked,’ he said.

‘Your security pass may have got you this far, but you can’t go in there, I’m afraid.’ The Doctor and Jo turned to see Bob Leezley standing in the corridor.

‘Ah. There are a few issues about Jo’s contract that I’d like to discuss with the Producer, that’s all, my good man,’ bluffed the Doctor.

Well, he’s not in at the moment. He doesn’t show up on rehearsal days usually. Speaking of which, it’s almost time to get back to the biz called show, Miss Grant. You’ve got the pleasure of my company for a full rehearsal this afternoon.’

‘Oh, good.’ Jo smiled, feigning enthusiasm.

‘I’ll escort you back downstairs then, Jo. Goodbye Mr Leezley. I look forward to the show tomorrow,’ said the Doctor Once the pair had walked a short distance from the office; Jo turned to the Doctor and quizzed him about something that had been bothering her during the short conversation. ‘That earpiece Bob wears, he shouldn’t need it now surely?’

‘That’s where he gets his instructions from the Director, I should imagine – and you’re right, he shouldn’t need it now, only when the show is live. Maybe it was a hearing aid. He could be deaf.’

‘I don’t know about deaf, but his tailor must be half-blind to make a

jacket like that!'

'Quite. All those clashing colours together. I'd never wear anything so vulgar.'

Bob Leezley remained outside the office, staring blankly at the door.

The two researchers who walked past were bemused by this – and even more bemused by his pose. He was pressing his hand to his earpiece as if he were listening to somebody.

Jo slumped on to the floor, exhausted. She'd never thought that performing could be such hard work. Looking around at the others, she expected them to look tired as well, but they didn't. She realised that this was probably because most of them had been doing this for weeks, long before the 'Stairway to the stars' feature where they picked three people from the audience and voted the winner on to the show. She thought back to that now and wondered how she'd come out on top.

The Doctor said he'd fixed it, but how? Bribes? That wasn't his styleit was almost as if the people behind the show had wanted her to win.

She remembered what Chris had said and wondered if that was

significant.

'Come on, time to go,' said a voice. Jo realised it was Lucy who was calling her. Jo replied, 'I'll be with you in a moment, just got to go to 172

the loo.' As she walked out of the room she caught Bob Leezley's eye, and hoped that he wouldn't follow her. After walking a short distance she was confident that he hadn't.

Further along the corridor she met up with the Doctor again. 'Good grief, what were we saying earlier about gaudy costumes?' he said.

'You insisted we had to go back to that office, so I haven't had time to change.' Jo replied, somewhat indignantly.

'All right, keep your silver jumpsuit on!' countered the Doctor.

'I don't think our presenter friend is following, so I think we're safe.

They'll soon realise that I'm missing, though.'

‘All I need is a couple of seconds, Jo. I would have got the sonic screwdriver working on that lock earlier if we hadn’t been interrupted.

Come on.’

They quickly reached the Producer’s office and after a furtive look around the corridor the Doctor reached inside his pocket and removed the sonic screwdriver. He was about to operate it, but then began shushing Jo, and pressed his ear against the door. As he listened Jo could see his expression changing until he had a face like thunder.

Without thinking, she said, ‘What is it Doctor?’ – a little too loudly.

Before the Doctor could reply, the duo heard the sound of the door being unlocked.

As it was opened, Jo gasped. ‘You!’ she exclaimed.

The Doctor said nothing. The Master stared back, smiling.

II

The Doctor and Jo sat at the desk opposite the Master. He reached across to a switch, which Jo realised must be a communicator. ‘Bob, please tell the chauffeur to take the young people to their hotel.’ He paused to listen to the response. ‘Yes, I know Miss Grant has gone missing. We are just having a little chat – and in any case she will be using alternative accommodation tonight.’

He looked up and faced the Doctor. ‘You are unusually quiet,’ he said. The Doctor steepled his fingers together on the desk and remained silent. The Master continued. ‘Well, how about you, Miss Grant? Are you enjoying your fifteen minutes of fame?’

‘You can’t use your mind control on me any more!’ she blurted.

‘I don’t need to. As you have probably realised, I have Bob Leezley under my power – not diffrcult I must say – I have my minions to help run my TV show, and I have my winner.’

‘It’s fixed!’ exclaimed Jo. ‘I knew it!’

The Master pointed to another switch on his control panel. Jo could see that it was a sliding control and she realised at once what it was.

‘The “clapometer” is, I believe, the rather quaint term for this device,’

he confirmed.

‘Who’s going to win then?’ asked Jo.

‘I’m sure you know, Miss Grant. Chris is so popular I can’t very well let him lose, can I? He has a huge army of female fans who scream at the merest hint of his presence.’

‘I suppose they’re also under your control.’ The Master and Jo had been so engaged in their conversation that they almost looked shocked when the Doctor finally spoke.

‘In a way, Doctor, yes. Are you sulking because you didn’t realise I was behind this little diversion? I’m surprised you didn’t guess. Have you not taken time to look at the title of the show?’

‘ *Make A Star*? It means nothing to me,’ said the Doctor.

‘ *Make A Star* – aka Master. Some might call it genius.’

‘Some might call it a simple word game. Was it for my benefit?’

‘My dear Doctor, though this may prick your ego, you and Miss

Grant are not even important to me in this plan – although I must admit I knew you would come sniffmg around eventually. When I saw your assistant in the audience I thought it rather amusing to let her join in,’

the Master explained, reaching inside a drawer and removing several objects from within Jo realised that they were dolls, like the one she’d seen in the bedroom the night before.

‘This is barbaric,’ the Doctor whispered. ‘I thought you had stopped using that tissue compression weapon.’

Jo suddenly realised what had been going on. She was wrong – these weren’t dolls.

These were the shrunken remains of the people who had gone

missing.

A look of horror spread across her face. ‘This is why you let me become part of the show, isn’t it? You’re going to do this to me as

well!' she gasped.

'I might find a replica of you quite repulsive, Miss Grant, but it could be a nice souvenir of your time on the show. Perhaps you'd like one, Doctor?'

The Doctor didn't rise to the bait. 'Why did you have to kill them all?' he asked.

'I couldn't take the risk of them going to the press. Besides, I needed prototypes for my dolls. The Auton gambit may not have worked but I still have some plastics factories that have come in very handy.'

'But what's the point of this whole talent-show business? Want to become Director General do you?' asked Jo.

The Master rose from his seat. 'Nothing so prosaic, Miss Grant. You will find out tomorrow. In the meantime we need to sort out some 174

overnight accommodation for you and the Doctor.'

'That means were going to be locked up again,' Jo said, as she

watched the Master press another button on his control panel.

'Very perceptive,' he said. 'Your dressing room will suffice. You already have your costume on so you won't even need to change for the contest.' As he spoke, two men in dark suits walked in and grabbed the Doctor and Jo.

The Master walked over to the Doctor and removed the sonic

screwdriver from his pocket. 'I'll have your toy, if you don't mind. We can't have you wandering around, can we?'

The Master watched impassively as the Doctor and Jo were frog-

marched out of his office. He passed the Sonic Screwdriver from hand to hand. 'Toy? Now there's a thought.'

Jo struggled against her bonds but found that it was quite impossible to get free. The Doctor, it seemed, had given up trying some time ago, which was quite unusual, although he had been in an extremely sombre mood ever since they had left the Master's office.

'Don't worry, Doctor, we'll get out and save the others,' she said cheerily.

‘I admire your optimism, Jo, but the problem is that this time, I have no idea what the Master is planning.’

‘I know. Annoying, isn’t it? Maybe there’s some clue that we’ve missed’

‘Maybe.’

‘Oh, come on, Doctor, stop feeling so sorry for yourself. It’s Chris I feel sorry for. He didn’t even want to be famous and now he could end up as one of those... well, I don’t even want to think about it.’

‘At least he seems to have things in perspective. From what you’ve told me, none of the others realise how fickle fame is. Did you ever want to be famous, Jo?’

‘Not really,’ she replied, and thought back to her childhood,

remembering her dreams of being a dancer and the ballet classes she’d gone to. Like a lot of young girls, she’d grown out of that quickly and got interested in other things. She could remember the posters on her bedroom wall. Most of her friends in the class fancied Paul or George but her favourite was John. He was more intriguing, different from the others.

‘I suppose if you do ever become famous,’ Jo mused, ‘you have to make the most of it while it lasts. Then you’ve always got the

memories, haven’t you? That’s how I’ll probably feel about my time with you.’

The Doctor turned his head towards her but Jo was daydreaming and failed to see the doleful look on his face. ‘I hope you’ll have the memories, Jo,’ he said.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I didn’t tell you about Jamie and Zoe, did I? No, it doesn’t matter.’

He tried to sit up a little, obviously forgetting his bonds, and winced at the pain. Jo wondered if she should ask about these people, who she assumed must also have travelled with the Doctor, but thought better of it. She could see he was slipping into a dark mood, though, and she had to try to get him out of it.

‘You’re not worried that I’m going to say, “Thanks Doctor, I’ll be off,” after all this, are you? Because I’m not.’

This seemed to cheer the Doctor a little. ‘You will one day, Jo: He paused. ‘Do you regret not going off with Latep?’ he asked.

‘Not at all. I liked him very much, but I don’t think my life would have been as...’

‘Exciting?’ the Doctor suggested. Jo nodded and watched as he

pointed towards the ceiling. ‘You know what you were saying about memories? Latep’s probably up there somewhere, flying his spaceship and thinking about his time with you at this very moment.’

A smile appeared and then disappeared on Jo’s face.

‘What’s up?’

‘Having adventures with you *is* much more fun than being on television or being famous, but I have enjoyed being back on Earth for a bit’ She had to admit that there were lots of little things that she missed when they were on other planets or in her future or past. Beans on toast, shopping for clothes, listening to the charts on a Sunday afternoon, visiting her Nan. She wondered if she’d get bored of those and miss travelling when the time came to settle down. ‘I guess it’s like the song goes,’ she said suddenly, ‘“You don’t know what you got till it’s gone.” I suppose you’re going to tell me now that you wrote that!’

The Doctor grinned at this. ‘No, as a matter of fact, but I agree with the sentiment.’

‘It’s certainly more appropriate than the song I’m doing tomorrow.

It’s quite ironic really, given what we’ve just been talking about.’

‘Oh? What is it then?’

‘Well, were all doing cover versions tomorrow. Mine is called

“Fame”. Funny, I’ve never heard of it, though.,

The Doctor looked incredulous. ‘“I’m gonna live forever”?’ he said.

‘Virtually. Yes, you’ve told me that before,’ giggled Jo.

‘I’m deadly serious,’ he replied. ‘Is that how it goes?’ Jo nodded and watched as the Doctor began to stroke his chin thoughtfully. ‘Well, he’s never meddled with the timeline before but that must be what he’s 176

doing.’

What?’asked Jo.

‘The Master’s getting you all to cover songs that haven’t been

written yet!’

‘Oh, right,’ said Jo, in truth none the wiser. ‘We can’t do much about it stuck fast in these chairs though, can we?’

‘No, I suggest we at least try to get some sleep and work on a

solution tomorrow morning.’

‘You mean, I try to sleep and *you* work on a solution?’ Jo’s features broke out into a broad grin which the Doctor returned. Despite the situation, she managed to get reasonably comfy and closed her eyes.

After about a minute she opened them slightly so she could see the Doctor. She hoped that their chat had cheered him up, and thought to herself how unusual it was to see him apparently asleep, though she was sure he probably wasn’t. Her eyelids fluttered then closed, and she drifted off, with the Doctor, wide awake, shuffling slightly so Jo’s lolling head landed on his shoulder.

The green-hued blur that greeted her slowly dissolved into the Doctor’s jacket as Jo rubbed her eyes, and she stretched to help herself feel more awake. ‘What time is it?’ she asked sleepily.

‘I’ve no idea, Jo, but I’m sure I heard something outside. That’s why I woke you up.’

‘Oh, did you?’ She didn’t remember that. She tried to remember

what they were going to do to stop the Master, then realised that she didn’t know what the plan was either. Maybe she’d been asleep for too long. She turned to the Doctor. Before she could say anything, he answered one of her potential questions.

‘We have to stop the Master unravelling the timeline from this nexus point and I think I know a way. It’s not very elegant though, and first

of all we have to get out of here.'

'Why don't we shout for help?' asked Jo.

'I should think the only people who visit this part of the building will be the crew on the show, and they've presumably been instructed to leave us here until the show starts, when it will probably be too late,'

explained the Doctor.

'I still think it's worth a try. *Hello*.' To her surprise there was a response. A high-pitched, screaming response. She pondered for a moment, then had a hunch. 'Are you Chris's fans?' she called out.

'Yeah!'squealed a girl's voice, 'Is he in there?'

Before Jo could respond, the Doctor tugged at her arm, indicating that she should be quiet, then spoke to the girl. 'Yes, he's just getting ready. Come in!'

The Doctor and Jo heard the sound of the doorknob rattling and then the girl spoke again. 'We can't get in!' she said.

'What? They must have locked us in for security. Hang on.'

Jo shrugged, unsure as to where this was getting them.

The Doctor continued. 'Chris'll speak to you and sign some

autographs if you'll get the key and unlock the door.'

There was more screaming outside and then silence.

'Do you think they fell for it, Doctor?'

'I think so, but they'll be terribly disappointed when they find out that Chris isn't here. They may not untie us but at least they'll get that door open.'

'How will they get the key, though?'

'You'll be surprised how resourceful young girls can be when they think they can get at their latest crush.'

'Hmmm I remember.' Jo smiled.

‘Have you still got that brooch I gave you?’

‘Yes, it’s in this pocket. Can you reach it with your hands tied?’

‘I think so. I’ve got an idea,’ the Doctor said, struggling to grasp the brooch. ‘When I say “now” I want you to pretend that Chris is outside and then cover your head as best you can.’

‘Why?’

‘You’ll see,’ said the Doctor.

After a short wait the noise returned, shortly followed by the sound of a key turning in the door. The group of girls raced in. They quickly realised that they’d been tricked, and the ringleader turned to Jo. ‘You lied to us! I hope *you* don’t think you’re going to win,’ she taunted.

‘He’d beat you easily, even if you weren’t tied up.’ She sneered at Jo.

‘I don’t suppose you young ladies would be good enough to release us from these bonds?’ asked the Doctor. They all giggled and shook their heads.

‘Oh well, it doesn’t matter *now!* ’

Reacting quickly, Jo nodded to the corridor outside and cried, ‘There he is! Hi Chris!’The girls began to squeal again.

Jo, tucking her head down and trying not to look, heard the dressing room mirror shatter. This didn’t stop the group of girls screaming but it did make them run from the room. The Doctor sighed as he heard them lock the door after them, then managed to grab a shard of glass and applied it to his ropes, rapidly setting himself and then Jo free.

‘You changed the frequency of that to resonate with the screams, didn’t you Doctor?’ asked Jo, pointing to the discarded brooch sitting amongst the remains of the mirror.

‘You know, I do believe you’re learning, Jo!’ he said, looking

pleased. ‘We still need to get out of here though.’

It’s not a complicated lock. Leave this bit to me.’ Jo grabbed a hairpin from the dressing-room table. She applied it to the keyhole and with a small click set them free once more. Carefully stepping out into the

corridor, they looked around. ‘I think it’s nearly time for the show.

I want you to carry on as normal. I have a few things to sort out and then I’ll deal with the Master,’ said the Doctor.

‘What about the timeline?’ questioned Jo.

‘The show may go ahead, but if things go to plan it won’t be

broadcast,’ the Doctor replied.

‘How will you manage that?’

‘I’ll get something else put out.’

‘Repeats again,’ said Jo.

‘Probably.’ The Doctor smiled at her and the two went their separate ways.

The Master heard the knock on the door and ignored it. He was sitting back with his feet up on the desk, enjoying his show. ‘Ha ha!’ he laughed, as Lucy left the stage, the applause ringing in her ears, not knowing that she’d just sung a song that wouldn’t be written for another fifteen years. There was a further, louder, knock on the door.

‘Yes, yes, what is it?’ he bellowed, walking across to unlock and open it. In the doorway the Doctor stood defiantly, his hands on his hips.

‘Too late, Doctor!’ the Master said and pointed to the screen. Jo was just beginning her performance.

‘Ah good, I shall enjoy this,’ replied the Doctor, settling down in a chair to watch the monitor.

Dumbfounded, the Master sat back down. ‘I’m glad to see you’ve

relaxed your attitude. You really are such a crashing bore when your dander is up.’

‘Oh, I’m not worried at all now, old chap. Direct feed from the studio is it?’ he said, pointing at the screen.

‘Yes, it is, as it happens.’

‘Aren’t you going to ask me how I escaped, then?’

‘It doesn’t matter now. As the timelines unravel I shall be in charge of the future on your favourite planet, and Chris and his growing gang of teenage fans will help me take over any unbelievers.’

The Master banged his fist down on the desk to emphasise this point, but the Doctor looked on impassively. ‘Well, I must admit, teenage girls can be terrifying at times,’ he said.

As Jo finished her performance, the Master spoke to Bob through his earpiece. ‘That’s it, announce the winner and wrap it up.’ He turned to the Doctor. ‘Show’s over Doctor, Chris has won and so, more

importantly, have I!’

The Doctor said nothing.

‘Gone quiet again have we, Doctor? Better than being pompous, I suppose.’

‘You know as well as I do that as Time Lords, we can feel the flow of timelines being changed. Can you feel anything? Because I can’t.’

The Master stopped smiling. ‘What have you done?’

‘You’ve made a basic technical error, I’m afraid. You’re not

monitoring your actual output, are you?’ The Doctor reached across to the screen and turned one of the switches. ‘There,’ he said, pointing triumphantly at the smirking figure that looked impassively out of the screen. ‘That is what your viewers have been watching for the last hour.’

‘The test card?’ roared the Master.

‘A quick call to Alistair, a few wires pulled out just in case, and Bob’s your uncle.’

‘No he’s not, he’s the host, Doctor!’ puffed Jo, out of breath after running from the studio to the office.

The Doctor turned round to greet her. ‘Quite so Jo, now then...’ He trailed off and spun back round to see a cabinet door slam shut –

followed by the sound of a TARDIS dematerialising.

Jo was surprised to see the Doctor looking a little crestfallen. ‘I would have thought you’d be happy Doctor,’ she said, looking puzzled

– then realised what the problem was. ‘Admit it, you wanted to gloat a little, didn’t you?’

‘He didn’t even give me a chance!’ spluttered the Doctor.

‘Doctor, how come you recognised that song I did today straight away?’

‘I’ve visited the early eighties Jo, and heard and seen some terrifying things, let me tell you. Legwarmers, snoods…’

‘How did you defeat the snoods?’ asked Jo. The Doctor looked

momentarily confused, then gazed down at her innocent face and

beamed.

‘They’re not monsters, Jo, they’re a fashion item,’ he said, then paused to rub his chin. ‘No, if I carry on like this like this I’ll complete the Master’s plan for him. Enough about the future – what about the present? I’m hungry. Now we could visit the canteen downstairs or I could take you to a posh restaurant. Which is it to be?’

Jo looked at up him, glad to see that familiar twinkle in his eye had returned. ‘The restaurant,’ she said. ‘No contest!’

The Canvey Angels

David Bailey

Take the picture away from me, Lord. Make it not haunt me every time I close my eyes. Her face, battered and bloodied; her cheek bruised purple. Her hands cupped over her belly, protecting her child to the end. Her red crepe dress, stretched tight over the bump of her womb, marked with dark, damp patches.

Since it had been raining so hard, I wasn’t certain whether those damp marks were rain or blood. I suppose that the cricket bat was simply sodden with rain, and it transferred its wetness as it was driven again and again into her stomach. Perhaps the blows had been so heavy that they broke the skin and drew blood, the red of it mingling darkly with the red of that beautiful crepe dress.

She slipped away as I watched.

They told me he had escaped, but there was no doubt of his eventual arrest, surely. Everyone knew who it was, as he'd been foolish enough to be witnessed by the drunkards turned out of the Breakspear's Arms at closing: Walter Seacombe, the eldest son of Nicholas. Some gutter-bound fishing boy, just the sort you could imagine doing this. Nicholas wouldn't say a thing, according to the police, just confirmed that his son had been at home all that night. I can imagine the scene: two bobbies on the doorstep, notebooks in hands, with old Nicholas, mock-innocent, backing up his son's every word. Walter Seacombe hanging back in the hall, smug and smiling.

Lord, can you not forgive me for the wrong I did her, and let her rest in my memory?

Is there no task I can perform for you to make amends?

That night was the same night the wheel of angels fell. As Hemmings watched from his kitchen window overlooking the sea, tears tracing paths down his cheeks just as the rain traced them down the

windowpane, they crashed through the clouds.

Their number rent a hole in the starless sky, and their light tore through the night, painting it pink and red. As the clouds healed their 181

wound, Hemmings watched the stars through the tear: all of Heaven, ranged beautifully, left shining in their wake. The angels' light glowed for a moment in the sea, then died, severed from its heavenly source.

Of course, Hemmings didn't realise then that he was watching

angels fall. But the signs that followed made everything clear to him.

In the days after that, a flood hit Canvey Island. It wasn't quite biblical, but it was certainly terrible. People were forced from their homes by waters that came up to their waists. A few lives were lost, and many buildings were ruined. Hemmings's church, St Anthony's, was out of action for a while, and his congregation had to join that of the Methodist church, built on higher ground.

As the waters receded, Hemmings returned to St Anthony's to

inspect the damage. The burial ground was sodden, and the white

walls of the church were stained a light brown in a line that reached a yard off the ground. Inside, the carpet was wet but everything else seemed to have withstood the deluge. Looking back, he realised that this, the preservation of his church, was the first sign.

The second sign came at the funeral of Marjory. Her family,

disgusted with Hemmings, had taken her body to the Methodist church for its final rest. They had dug up the dank soil, in which the earthworms had drowned, fat and white, and lowered her casket into the grave. Hemmings had been watching from just outside the church grounds and, as the coffin touched the mire at the bottom of the hole, Marjory's mother looked over to where he stood. In her eyes burned a fire, a heavenly radiance, and it ate its way into his soul.

The aspect of Heaven that briefly resided within her told Hemmings that he would be given a second, greater chance. A chance to do something that lay outside even the powers of the Father.

He walked back from the funeral full of wonder, looking at the

world anew, seeking its Godly aspects. Caught up in himself, he walked for hours, along the streets of Leigh Beck, up the Marine Parade and on to the shores beyond. Eyes raised to Heaven, he saw things beyond the seagulls, the clouds, and the sky. Hemmings stepped into a pool left by the tide. Straight away, the water began to seep through the leather of his shoes, but Hemmings still stared at the sky, at a shaft of Heaven that had sundered the clouds, scattering the sea with patches of gold. Hemmings took a step backwards and looked down into the pool.

There, in the tatters of its wings, lay the third and final sign: an angel. The doors to Heaven slammed shut behind it; the God-given beauty of the creature had been stripped away. Since it had fallen from above, just a few short days ago, it had been battered by the sea –

bloated and rotten, its porcelain skin had become a rough, pink hide

like that of a pig. Its pulpy face, mashed beyond recognition, had lost one eye; the other was huge, milky and distended. It had teeth like those of a fox, little needles of white. If it could have stood, it would have reached just up to Hemmings's shoulder – a little over five feet –

but its body was so wrecked and lifeless that its standing was a moot point. Its feet were the clearest symptom of its fall from grace: they

had been warped into a ‘u’ shape, and their toes hardened into something like bone. It bore the cloven feet of demons.

But he knew it was an angel, nonetheless. The creature had

obviously displeased the Lord, and had – with its fellows – been expelled from Heaven to greet death on Earth, then eternity in Hell. He realised what God had presented him with: this was his chance for redemption. Here was a creature God could not forgive, cast down into Hemmings’s parish. He must forgive these angels that God himself judged beyond salvation.

Hemmings took the drenched body in his arms, and began the walk back to St Anthony’s. He kept to the scrub around the village for as long as he could, switching to quiet backstreets only when it was absolutely necessary. He hurried as fast as his load would allow, finally reaching the church, shoving its door open with his hip and taking the poor creature inside.

Stopping only for a second to catch his breath, he took the creature up the aisle, his feet squelching slightly on the still wet carpet, to a door just to the left of the altar – the entrance to the crypt. He unlocked the door and flicked the switch on the wall just inside, and watched as the light from below cascaded up the stone staircase. Picking up the angel once more, he carefully carried it down.

The crypt was functional, empty and neglected. Its stone walls

reflected the light from the single, unadorned light bulb that swung from the ceiling. The light caught the motes of dust that his arrival had disturbed; they wheeled and twisted, not sure now where to settle.

Under the wooden staircase sat a few boxes containing various

sundries: Bibles, cassocks, wafers and wine. Wooden benches were ranged around the walls, and it was on one of them that Hemmings rested the angel.

He was breathless and exhausted, but he knew he hadn’t much time to lose. He staggered back up the steps, using his tired arms to steady himself against the walls, and walked over to the vestry. The door of the tall cupboard there was jammed – it had swollen in the flood, and stretched tight against its frame – but a couple of sharp tugs saw it open. Hemmings found the bottle of holy oil behind a pile of Bibles Taking the cork-stoppered bottle, he walked quickly back down into

the crypt.

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He knelt next to the prone angel, and pulled the stopper from its neck. The rose perfume that drifted up from the oil suddenly made Hemmings realise how badly the fallen angel smelt. He supposed he had been unconsciously blocking it out, but now the rank, salty smell of its decomposition was everywhere: in the crypt, on his hands, on his jacket.

He upended the bottle and dropped a small amount of the oil on to his fingertip. He touched the oil to the festering eye; on to the tiny ears; the rotten nostrils – ragged, gaping holes in its pink face; across its thin lips; and on to its tiny, bony hands. Taking a deep breath, Hemmings began the sacrament.

'Through this holy anointing,' he breathed, the words hurried and urgent, 'may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit. Amen.' He swallowed hard, his throat dry and prickly, then continued. 'May the Lord who frees you from sin save you, and raise you up...'

Hemmings raced his way through the Sacrament of Extreme Unction as fast as he could, conscious that the longer the angel remained unblessed, the further from Heaven it would slip. He didn't dare let any distraction stop him until the words were finished, not even when the angel's skin began to turn a pale white, then shimmered with colours, like a drop of petroleum in a puddle. In fact, on seeing this, Hemmings smiled. Although the angel was still cursed with its final, hideous form, it was obviously once more living in the grace of God.

He finished the sacrament, and stared for a long few minutes at the dead angel, its light suffusing him with its joy and warmth. The strange dance of the colours across its skin continued, tainting the walls of the crypt with all sorts of ever-shifting patterns.

Hemmings, unable to tear his eyes away from the beautiful creature, walked carefully backwards to the staircase out of the crypt. Before he turned to leave, he crossed himself, looked long into the shattered face of the corpse, and said. 'Rest easy now. I'll find your brothers, and then you will all live again in Heaven's grace. Good night. God bless.'

Although she'd popped back into the TARDIS to change into her

shortest denim shorts and a pink vest, Peri was still boiling. As she

stomped up the gentle slope of dry, yellow grass, she wiped a thin sheen of perspiration from her forehead. She wondered how the Doctor managed, as she watched the sun beat down on his white jumper. He had slung his jacket over his shoulder, and was, at least, fanning himself with his hat, but he showed little sign of suffering from the fantastic temperature.

The Doctor was staring at the building in front of them: a small 184

church, its whitewashed walls glowing in the sunlightits ruddy tiled roof, almost the colour of dried blood, balanced atop the simple cruciform of the church, and was crowned with the tiniest spire, a little slate pyramid. Narrow stained-glass windows were dotted around its walls, and a small porch showed the way in, covered by the same red tiles as the roof.

The grass here, like everywhere else shed passed on the way from the pebbly beach where the TARDIS had landed, had been dried to straw by the sun.

The only green Peri could see now was the tall trees that hid a row of bungalows ranged behind the church grounds. Raising a hand to shield her eyes from the bright sun, Peri peered over at the houses: peaceful-looking abodes, adorned with flowering creepers and blooming

hanging baskets. The walls of the houses were painted a pastel-rainbow of colours; pinks, greens, blues and pale yellows combined to give them the look of dolly mixtures.

‘So,’ she asked, ‘where are we this time?’

The Doctor turned to her, smiling. ‘St Anthony of Padua.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

The Doctor turned back to the church and started walking. He raised a hand to indicate a large sign standing in the church grounds. Raising his voice, he proclaimed, ‘“The Parish Church of St Anthony of Padua, RC.” He was the patron saint of lost things, you know.’

‘Great,’ muttered Peri. ‘Then he’s on our side.’

The Doctor had stopped once more and seemed to be looking for

something in the sky. ‘I was never one for prayer myself, but if I was,

Anthony would be a good one to pray to. He was a bit of a whizz at finding things. I suppose it helped that he lost everything he owned in a shipwreck, and spent the rest of his days living like a Spartan in a cave in San Paolo. And anyway,' the Doctor suddenly changed tack, 'we're not lost.'

'We're not?' Pen heard the note of surprise in her voice the minute the words left her lips.

The Doctor looked her straight in the eye. 'Am I that bad at getting us from A to B, Peri?'

Pen smirked. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'Are you going to tell me, then?'

'Canvey Island.' The Doctor said, the insult forgotten. 'In Essex.

The height of summer, 1953.' The Doctor continued to walk ahead, striding up the path to the church door. Peri jogged to catch up with him.

'I love the fifties,' she said as she reached him at the door. 'All the music, the clothes...'

The Doctor looked her up and down. 'While this decade marked a

slight move towards more permissive fashions.' he said, raising an eyebrow, 'do think what you're wearing might be a little out of place.'

'What are you saying, Umpire Guy?' she said with a giggle, 'It was hot, I dressed for hot. Look, are we going inside?'

'What?' The Doctor looked around, remembering where he was. Oh, the church.

Pen could hear a low, doleful sound of singing from inside, 'It's a long time since I've been in one of these,' she said.

'Then you've probably got a lot of things to confess,' the Doctor said, smiling. 'Come on, after you.'

She pushed open the door, a little worried about entering the church halfway through a service. Inside, the congregation stood in front of their wooden pews, facing the altar, a simple table covered with a pristine white cloth. On the wall behind it hung a wooden crucifix, lovingly polished to within an inch of its eternal life. On each

windowsill sat a flower arrangement, but every bloom had withered and wilted in the heat.

In the pulpit stood the young priest, a tall, thin man in his mid-thirties. His short dark hair was carefully sculpted into a small quiff.

His blue eyes, Peri noticed, would have fitted in with the otherwise handsome face, if it weren't for the fact that they were deep set and there were dark, bruised rings around each. His hands seemed to be struggling under the weight of the book he held; they were quaking slightly, almost as if he were shivering with cold.

His voice, leading the singing of his flock, was loud and deep, proud to be proclaiming the glory of the Lord. Peri realised now that they were singing the Kyrie eleison. 'Lord have mercy ' The priest's eyes caught Peri's, and he smiled, waving the two of them in. He nodded at an empty pew near the back of the church, and the Doctor and Peri quietly slipped into their seats.

There was a rumble of feet and bottoms on seats as the rest of the congregation sat down.

The priest's voice echoed through the coughs of the people. It was a bold, proud voice; entrancing, Peri thought.

His flock were staring up at him, their attention ceaselessly focused on his words, on his voice. The middle-aged women, their pill-box hats a sea of summer colours, seemed particularly captivated. They wore little smiles on their faces, and their eyes were sparkling as they gazed at him Peri could see the attraction – his high cheekbones balanced a strong jaw, and his eyes, tired-looking though they were, gleamed with passion. The noble piety of the believer, Peri supposed.

Peri sat through the rest of the service, the Doctor at her side, reading page after page of the little hardbound book. She found herself 186

strangely comforted by the hour that passed – probably, she thought, because it was so wonderfully mundane, so gorgeously Earthy, that it made a very pleasant change from charging from one end of the

universe to the other.

At the end of the mass, as the congregation passed out of the church, chatting quietly to each other, the priest walked down the aisle, all smiles and handshakes. He stopped by their pew, and the Doctor stood up, holding out his hand.

The priest grasped it firmly and, shaking it, said, 'Hello, I've not seen you at St Anthony's before, have I?'

'No, no.' said the Doctor. 'We're here visiting some friends, and thought we'd pop in.'

'Good,' the priest said, beaming. 'You're welcome to join us outside for coffee with some of the ladies, if you like.'

The Doctor glanced at Peri who, filled with a comfortable warmth, smiled her approval. He turned back to the priest and said, 'That would be lovely. We'll see you outside.'

The priest grinned, then pushed his way through the crowd. The

minute he was outside, the Doctor's face fell. He was frowning deeply, looking all around the inside of the building, his eyes burrowing into that nook, delving into this cranny.

'What's up?' Peri asked.

The Doctor began to pace up the aisle towards the altar. 'I'm not sure, but look at this.' He turned to face her, one finger pointing at the celery he inexplicably wore on his lapel. He was holding the jacket out to her, and Peri peered closely at the vegetable.

'What about it?' She could see nothing unusual about the celery, other than a bit of yellowing and wilting, which she put down to the blistering summer outside. 'It's just gone a bit limp, that's all.'

'Exactly.'

'But that's just the heat, surely?'

'It didn't wilt on Sarn.' the Doctor pointed out, reminding Peri of that planet's fierce sun and baking volcanic rocks.

'What do you think is doing it?' she asked as she followed him up towards the altar.

'It could be any number of things,' he said, brushing a finger along the altar rail. He examined it, rubbing the thin smattering of dust between his fingers. 'I'll need to check out some things in the TARDIS

to be sure' He turned to her, put his hands on her shoulders and smiled.

‘Can you do the official visit while I pop back there?’

‘No problem,’ Peri replied. ‘Are you going to be long?’

‘Oh, I shouldn’t think so,’ he said. ‘I’ll catch up with you outside.’

With that, the Doctor began to stride out of the church, inquisitively
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poking the stick of celery all the while. Taking one last look around the peaceful room, Peri went to brave the heat outside and meet the ladies.

They were standing around a flowerbed of thirsty-looking roses. Peri, a little embarrassed about sticking out, had spent some time after the church service just staring at the baked ground under the plants – a dead grey-brown, hard as concrete and riddled with cracks. A kindly seeming woman, all floaty cotton and big hair, had rushed to offer her an orange squash almost as soon as she’d stepped outside, but then she’d bustled off to see to everyone else and Peri was left alone.

From a comfortable distance, Peri had pretended to enjoy the

scenery and the sun on her face, while she listened in on the gaggle of women and the gossip. Something about Marjory. Something about the Kennedys? Wrong decade, surely? Something about Father

Hemmings...

A few of the women tutted and shook their heads. One woman –

young, pretty, a bit soft in the head by the looks of it – went all gooey-eyed and tried to persuade the others that... What? ‘He’s not a bad man,’ she trilled, jiggling up and down on the balls of her feet.

Priesthood groupie.

The other women were shaking their heads again, looking at the

ground. ‘A fine man,’ he was called. Then, ‘Such a shame.’

And on it went. Peri craned her neck to hear more, but the women were whispering now, with serious looks on their faces, and she couldn’t hear a word. She took a sip of her orange squash.

In the baking sun, the drink – the worst she’d ever tasted; didn’t they have Coke? – had thoroughly warmed through. Peri frowned to

herself, watching a grisly looking sediment of flavouring and colouring sink to the bottom of her glass.

She wanted to give it to the roses – she figured they needed it more –

but she knew it would seem rude to tip her drink into the ground in front of the others.

‘Poor things,’ a voice chimed in her ear.

Peri looked up, to be greeted by a slightly yellowing and crooked smile. It belonged to a tiny old woman with a face wrinkled in on itself, with many lines and folds like crumpled paper. Her eyes were in there somewhere, Peri knew, but they were well hidden behind a heavy pair of horn-rimmed spectacles. Her white hair was trying to escape from her head to join the clouds it so startlingly resembled.

‘I can’t believe this summer,’ she carried on in her small, tuneful voice, gazing down sadly at the roses. ‘And after all that flooding!

Makes no sense at all!’

Peri laughed lightly. ‘I know. It’s nice weather, though.’

‘You Americans always think that’s all we care about, the weather.

I’m Agatha,’ the woman said.

‘Peri.’

Agatha looked her up and down, then nodded firmly to herself. Peri had passed some sort of test, though she had no idea what. Agatha started to walk away from the church, through the gravestones, and Peri followed.

‘Agatha,’ Peri said, dodging a knot of nettles, ‘what are those women talking about?’

Agatha stopped, but kept her back to Peri. ‘Yes, and you’ve about as much shame as an average American.’

‘I didn’t mean to pry. If it’s none of my business, then don’t tell me.’

‘Ah, but it’s none of theirs, neither,’ Agatha replied, turning to face her. The old woman sighed, then continued. ‘They’re talking of

Marjory Kennedy, young Walter Seacombe's girl. Or she was.

Hemmings took a fancy to her the minute he arrived on the island, and Marjory never tried to put him off.'

'So this Walter broke up with her, then?'

'In a manner of speaking.' Despite the baking sun, Peri suddenly felt a chill as she stared at the serious-looking woman. 'Walter killed her.

Ah, the police can't have him for it – Walter's father wouldn't let that happen – but kill her he did. Everyone knows. Horrid, it was. Just horrid.'

'Oh, I'm so sorry,' Peri gasped.

'No skin off mine, love. The Kennedys are a right bunch. That

woman there,' Agatha said, pointing at a middle-aged woman with black hair and a scarlet dress. 'that' s Marjory's mother, Rita.

Whatever happened the night Marjory died, she's never forgiven

Father Hemmings for it.'

'What do you mean?'

'The last I know, the father went over to the hospital to give young Marjory her Last Rites. Next day, Rita gathered, that gang around her and started poisoning them against him. Even wrote to the bishop. She wants rid.'

Peri was about to ask why, when she heard a cry from the street and looked up to see the Doctor jogging up to the church. 'Peri? Peri, I've checked some readings in the... in the, er...'

The Doctor had noticed Agatha, her eyebrows raised in surprise at his arrival, and had managed to interrupt himself. 'Good morning,' he said, reaching to doff his hat it wasn't there, so he ruffled his hair instead. 'I'm the Doctor. I see you've met my young friend, Peri.'

Agatha just huffed quietly to herself. Peri leant over and muttered in her ear, 'Don't mind him. He's your proper English eccentric.'

'Can't say I care much for them, either.' Agatha hunched up her

shoulders and began to stride off purposefully. ‘That lunch ain’t going to cook itself. Goodbye, Peri.’

Peri watched her go for a second, then turned to the Doctor.

‘Shouting stuff about checking readings in the middle of the fifties isn’t a very subtle way to go about things, Doctor,’ she chuckled.

‘No. No, I suppose not.’ The Doctor was distracted, looking past Peri and gazing at the church.

‘So,’ she tried again, ‘are you going to tell me what you’ve

discovered?’

‘What?’ He focused on her and smiled weakly. ‘Oh, yes. Yes, of

course. Well,’ he said, scratching his head. ‘not a lot, really. The TARDIS sensors definitely indicate a form of radiation not of this Earth, centred on the church. I’m going to need to snoop about a bit, I think, if I’m to find out more.’

‘I know how you feel. Agatha – that woman I was talking to – told me all this stuff about a murder. I thought I might see what it’s all about.’

‘Murder, you say?’ the Doctor said. ‘Well, whatever keeps you out of trouble. It shouldn’t take me long to figure out what’s going on at the church. Why don’t you see to all that while I have a word with the father?’

The women had started to file away from the church, Father

Hemmings waving them off. Peri and the Doctor fell silent, smiling their hellos, as the group of women passed them. Peri tried to catch Rita Kennedy’s eye, but she was moving away quite quickly,

determined to get away.

‘You do that, Doctor,’ Peri said, starting to trot after Rita. ‘I’ll meet you back at the TARDIS in a couple of hours.’

She followed the woman down a wide street. Generous pavements and broad grass verges bordered an empty road: there were a couple of cars parked here and there, but no one seemed terribly interested in driving them on such a hot day. Peri walked briskly behind Rita, keeping her distance, figuring out what she would say to the woman, how she could ask about her daughter’s murder.

Lost in thought, she almost missed it when Rita turned sharply into her driveway.

Peri picked up the pace just in time to catch Rita's attention as she was dosing her front door. The woman's face turned into a scowl, and she shouted out, 'I saw you talking to Agatha!'

'Mrs Kennedy, let me explain,' Peri began, raising her palms to calm the woman.

'I know what this is about,' Rita snarled. 'You've been poking your nose into business that's none of yours.'

Rita motioned to shut the door Peri raised a hand and cried. 'Please, Mrs Kennedy, I want to help.'

But the door slammed shut, the sound echoing around the empty

street. Peri sighed and stared at the peeling red paint on the door frame.

Should she knock? Should she keep trying?

'Miss!' The voice was little more than a whisper, but she could hear it perfectly. Peri looked to her left and saw a young man, his brown hair Brylcreemed into submission, waving his hand for her to join him.

He looked around himself, peering out from under a heavy brow,

always checking that the coast was clear.

'Miss,' he hissed again. 'You want to know about Marjory, yeah?'

Peri looked around too, to see if she could see what he was so wary of. There was no one about, and nor could she see any twitching curtains. Slowly, Peri walked over to join him.

'Who are you?' she asked. 'What do you want?'

'Come back here, and I'll tell you anything you want to know.' The man started to walk down the passage at the side of the house, under a rickety corrugated plastic awning, and disappeared into the back garden.

With one last look around her and with no small amount of

trepidation, Peri followed.

When she'd made it down the passage, she was greeted with a

garden like all those she had seen in the street – yellowing, wilting, crying out for rain. The man was sitting on a wooden bench which was tucked into the shade of the house. He was staring at her, smiling uncertainly. 'Are you all right?' he asked.

'Funny question,' Peri replied. 'I seem to find myself coming over all Miss Marple, but, yeah. Yeah, I'm fine.'

'Good. Good,' he said, nodding. 'The ladies haven't got to you, then.' He looked around again, his smile vanishing. 'They haven't told you nothing about me.'

Peri took a step back. 'You're Walter, aren't you?'

He stared at her, and all the bright sunlight around them seemed to drain away, as if a thick cloud were drifting overhead. 'You're frightened of me, aren't you?' he said, his voice low and thunderous.

'Like all of them. Like all the rest of them. Walter, the killer.'

'I'm sure that they don't think that,' Peri stammered. She clutched her arms around her, hugging herself for a warmth that wouldn't come.

'Of course they think that!' he spat, glaring at the dead grass on the lawn. 'Bloody Hemmings, bet he made 'em think it too.'

'The priest?' Peri wanted to run, but knew she must hear what

Walter had to say.

'If he'd kept his bloody nose out of it, none of this would have happened. None of it!' He turned his gaze on her now, and it was dark with anger and hatred. Peri couldn't speak. 'Couldn't keep her hands off him, Marjory couldn't. Wouldn't even look at me, some nights.

Like precious Father Hemmings was the only thing in the world.'

He pulled his knees up to his chest and swung round on the bench.

Now he was swaying, clutching himself tighter, his eyes clamped shut.

He took a deep, shuddering breath and continued.

‘I knew she’d done it. I even knew the night. Said she couldn’t come to the dance, had to help the father at the church.’ He laughed quietly to himself, and it was high and fragile. ‘Help him, she did – helped him good.

‘’Course, she wouldn’t touch me after that. Not even when we

thought we had a family on the way. She said... All she wanted was a father to that child, but it wasn’t going to be me. She said it wasn’t going to be me.’

He was rocking hard now, the small of his back butting up against the arm of the bench. Peri’s mind was swirling, swirling; she couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

‘No, she wanted him.’ His voice sank into a whisper. ‘So I beat her.

And her treacherous belly, too. Beat her good. Saw her off, and that kid. I wanted to be its father. I wanted to be the dad. But she didn’t want me. No. So I beat her. One, two, three...’

He kept repeating it – ‘One, two, three...’ – as he shook back and forth. He was crying now and part of Pen wanted to reach out and comfort him. But she was too scared. Quietly, softly, she walked backwards to the passage by the side of the house and slipped away.

Peri was out of breath as she finally made it to the beach where the TARDIS had landed. At last, she let herself slow down, and she

stopped for a moment, bending down with her hands on her knees, to get her breath.

Looking up, she was relieved to see the Doctor sitting on the beach next to the ship, his back to her, throwing stones into the gentle waves.

A couple of seagulls flapped up from the surface of the sea, disturbed by the Doctor’s aimless game. Peri watched as they wheeled into the ice-blue sky, then had to look away when they crossed the dazzling sun.

As Pen walked to his side, she noticed the Doctor was also watching the gulls. ‘How did the snooping go?’ she asked. ‘Did Father

Hemmings give anything away about this radiation?'

The Doctor's reverie broken, he turned to face her, a soft frown 192

folding his face. 'No. Nothing at all. But a nice enough chap, I suppose.'

'Nice?' Pen echoed. 'I don't know.'

'What do you mean?' The Doctor stood up, and patted his backside to dust off the sand that was stuck to the tails of his jacket.

Together, they walked along the beach, the sun warming their backs.

'Some pretty horrible things have been going on. Some kid called Walter killed a girl because she was having an affair with Hemmings.

At least, I think that's what was going on. He wasn't making a lot of sense.'

'Nothing here is, Peri.' The Doctor stopped for a second, stooped and picked up what looked like a torn shred of a plastic bag. Pen watched as he rubbed it between his fingers, then dropped it to the ground. This radiation –'

'This radiation,' Pen interrupted, her voice stern. 'Has it killed anyone?'

'Well it's hard to be sure, but...'

'Oh, come on Doctor.' Peri stepped in front of him, and stared up into his face. 'The people of this town have been torn apart by the death of this girl. That's all they care about, not some stupid radiation that makes celery wilt.'

'It could be deadly!' the Doctor yelped. Peri knew he wasn't sure –

his voice sounded weak, almost girly.

'But it's not killed anyone, has it?'

'It doesn't seem to have done, no. But it's centred on the church, and Hemmings, he seemed... well, a bit drawn.'

'The woman he was having an affair with has been killed. That's hardly a recipe for the picture of health.'

The Doctor looked away for a second, over Peas shoulder. His

eyebrows raised, and a smile tickled his lips. ‘All right, then, let’s see if we can find out any more.’

Peri turned to follow his gaze. A few dozen yards along the beach, she could see Father Hemmings walking in their direction. Every few paces, he would suddenly slow, bending his knees to examine the ground. The Doctor and Peri walked to meet him

Hemmings was so engrossed in his inspection of the beach that he almost jumped out of his skin when the Doctor finally spoke. ‘Father!

What a glorious afternoon, no?’

‘Hmm?’ Hemmings looked at them, blinked a couple of times, then squinted against the sun. Peri noticed him whip one of his hands behind his back, and she watched as she saw something white – was it fabric? – flutter to the ground.

‘I was just saying,’ the Doctor tried again. ‘That it’s lovely weather.

It’s wonderful to be taking the air on a day like this.’

‘Yes.’ Hemmings almost whispered his reply. He coughed to clear his throat, then continued in a stronger voice. ‘Anyway, I’m sure you must have more pressing things to attend to if you’ll excuse me.’

He motioned to step past them and carry on his way but, before he had taken even half-a-dozen steps, Peri decided to grab her chance.

‘Why is Mrs Kennedy trying to turn the other parishioners against you?’

Hemmings stopped dead in his tracks. He lifted his hands slightly, and stared hard at his fingertips, staying that way for nearly thirty seconds.

‘Father?’ Peri pressed. ‘I asked you –’

‘The Almighty,’ he suddenly said, his voice as heavy as lead, ‘has forgiven me that wrong. Why can’t people see that I am making

amends?’

‘What do you mean?’ Peri asked, carefully keeping her voice soft.

‘I have a new task,’ Hemmings replied, turning to face her at last.

There was fire in his eyes, but it burnt cold. ‘God has shown me a new plan, one at which I must not fail if you’ll excuse me.’ His request to be left alone was more firm now, and he didn’t wait to hear their reply.

He stomped off along the beach, leaving a bemused Pen behind.

‘Doctor,’ she said, ‘what was all that about?’

The Doctor pulled his rolled-up hat from his pocket, shook it open and fanned himself with it. ‘That was almost certainly a side effect of the radiation poisoning I think we’d better go and have a good look around that church.’ The Doctor started to stride off, and Peri jogged to keep up with him.

‘Did you ever stop to consider,’ she said as they walked, ‘that the problem might be something a little less alien?’

Hemmings stumbled over some pebbles as he ran to the fallen one’s side. He fell to his knees, ignoring the dampness seeping through his trousers, and brushed a hand over its ruined, broken face.

‘Thank you, Lord,’ he whispered. ‘I can forgive him.’

Carefully, he slipped his arms underneath the creature and hauled it from the sand as he got to his feet. Slowly, slowly, he started the long, solemn walk back to the church.

The Doctor was buzzing round the church, peering into every nook and cranny. He disappeared into the vestry, and reappeared a moment later, standing still and looking in every direction.

‘No luck?’ Peri asked him.

‘Nothing in there. Just a heap of books – parish records, that kind of

thing.’ He dashed up to the altar and crouched next to it, tapping its sides and examining the carpet.

Well, Peri thought, I’m deep enough in this now. I might as well do some real snooping.

With a last glance at the Doctor – who was now standing and

examining a stained-glass window from a distance – she walked past the open door and into the vestry.

It was a small room, lined with shelf upon shelf of hymn books and prayer books. On a simple oak table in the middle of the room lay an open book – she could see from its line after line of handwritten details that it was the parish record.

Thankfully, Canvey Island had quite a small population, so she

didn't have to search for long before she stumbled across the entries for Marjory Kennedy's baptism and then, a dozen years later, her

confirmation. Peri flicked back through the book to the present day, but there was absolutely no mention of her death.

She carefully closed the register, drumming her fingers on its cover and looking around the other books on the table. Her eyes fell upon a small leatherbound volume, gold leaf on its cover proclaiming it a

'1953 Diary'. With a glance around to make sure she was alone, she opened it.

She could tell – from entries like 'Lencombe's wedding, 11 a.m.'

and 'Tea with the WI, 10 a.m.' – that this was Hemmings's work diary.

Nice handwriting, she noted. She leafed through it, and found a few mentions of Hemmings's scheduled visits to ill or dying people in hospital. When things got particularly bad, Peri noticed, Hemmings had written that he had performed the Rite of Extreme Unction – the Last Rites – for those who weren't going to make it through the night.

As she leafed through to more recent dates, she found a simple entry, written in messy upper-case letters:

'MARJORY DIED IN HOSPITAL. CHILD WITH HER.

TONIGHT, THE ANGELS FELL.'

No mention of the Last Rites – and what on earth were the –

'Peri!' The Doctor was shouting for her attention from inside the main church. She put the diary back where she had found it, before she walked through to join him.

Across the other side of the church, she saw the Doctor grinning by an open door. A staircase on the other side of it led down into darkness.

In his hand, a small device was quietly bleeping to itself.

‘It’s the crypt!’ he explained. ‘I managed to get the lock open.

According to this,’ the Doctor raised the device, ‘that’s the source of the radiation.’ He disappeared through the door and, reluctantly, Pen followed.

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As she descended the stairs, the Doctor carefully marking the way for her, she noticed that it wasn’t all that dark in the crypt after all. She could see a shimmering light coruscating off the walls and floor ahead of her – like sunlight reflected off a pool of water.

The Doctor, a few steps ahead of her, suddenly stopped as he

reached the last step. ’Be careful, Peri,’ he whispered, then he turned the corner and entered the crypt.

Peri took the last couple of steps down and went to follow him, but stopped in horror.

Against the walls of the plain, grey stone crypt stood four wooden benches, and on top of three of them lay... Peri didn’t know what, but whatever they were, they were grotesque: rotting flesh peeling off thin, bony bodies; sharp, vicious-looking teeth; three-inch claws at the tips of emaciated fingers. She could smell their salty decomposition in the still, cool air of the windowless chamber. She wanted to look away, but there was no chance of that.

As hideously deformed as these monsters were, they were

fascinating too. A multicoloured aura scintillated around them, sparkling from every shred of their tattered skin. Its patterns flooded the crypt with a pale light that danced around the shadows, and played in the dusty corners.

‘Are they dead?’ Peri’s voice was a throaty whisper, caught in her throat with her terror.

‘I think so,’ the Doctor said as he bent to stare right into the face of one of them.

‘And that light? Is that the radiation?’

The Doctor nodded. ‘A sign of it, yes.’ He paused, lifting his hand to the creature’s face and almost touching it.

‘I know this sounds odd,’ Peri said, ‘but Hemmings’s diary said something about angels. I think he might have meant these things. But they’re...’

‘Hardly angelic.’

From behind her, Peri suddenly heard something – slow, deliberate footsteps, scuffing against each stone step as they descended.

She looked to the Doctor and was about to alert him, but she noticed he had a finger raised to his lips. He’d heard, too. He motioned to a pile of cardboard boxes, and Peri scuttled quietly behind them. The Doctor jammed himself in after her, and from their crouching position, they watched as Hemmings entered the crypt.

In his arms, he was cradling a fourth creature. This one wasn’t shining like the others, and it was dripping water on to the dusty stone floor. Carefully, whispering to himself – to it? – Hemmings laid the creature on the fourth bench, then knelt next to it. He slipped a small 196

bottle from his jacket pocket, and unstoppered it. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, then began to perform some sort of ceremony, touching the creature’s head and lips.

Peri scoured her memory and whispered, ‘Isn’t that the Last Rites?’

The Doctor just nodded, frowning.

‘Why isn’t that one glowing?’ Peri asked.

The Doctor, still not turning to face her, whispered, ‘If my readings are correct, this kind of radiation is nullified by salt water. If Hemmings found these things on the beach, then the sea would have been neutralising their energy. But once they get the chance to dry out...’ He nodded towards the glowing creatures.

‘Well, how long before this other one gets dry?’

The Doctor glanced down at his device, and suddenly his face fell.

Peri looked up and gasped as the first creature was rapidly enveloped in a brilliant, sparkling light. The Doctor’s device screeched in alarm.

Hemmings dropped the bottle in shock, and the oil began to pour on to the floor. He wheeled round, as the Doctor and Pen stood up to face him.

‘What are you doing here?’ he demanded.

‘I could ask you the same thing,’ the Doctor snapped. ‘Don’t you realise what terrible danger you’re putting yourself in? Not to mention your parishioners! Collecting the corpses of aliens is risky business.’

‘There is no danger! No risk!’ Hemmings spat. ‘These are God’s

creatures – angels, fallen from Heaven. I must forgive them. I must!’

Slowly, the Doctor stepped out from behind the boxes. Hemmings

watched him carefully, his fists bunched by his sides, trembling.

‘Father, listen to me. I don’t know what these things are, but they’re poisonous to you. They could be killing you.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ Hemmings replied, more calmly this time.

‘God would never endanger the faithful. I am merely carrying out his plan.’

‘There is no plan.’ The Doctor’s voice was soft, reasonable. ‘They must be the victims of some terrible accident. They should have just been left in peace.’

‘They can have no peace without forgiveness!’ Hemmings cried. ‘No one can ever be at rest without forgiveness!’

Peri swallowed hard. She stepped silently out from the boxes, and walked slowly to stand between the two men. She stared into

Hemmings blue eyes, noticing again the blackened bags that lay

crinkled underneath them. She smiled at him, but she knew it was weakened by her fear.

‘Father,’ she stared, trying to keep the tremor from her voice, ‘why are these angels worthy of forgiveness, when Marjory Kennedy was 197

not?’

Silence filled the crypt. Hemmings had closed his eyes, and

unclenched his fists. His shoulders slumped, and his head lolled forward.

'Peri?' The Doctor stepped up to her, putting his hand on her

shoulder.

'He never gave Marjory the Last Rites,' Peri quietly explained. 'She was murdered by Walter Seacombe, her boyfriend. But Marjory had been having an affair with the father here, and she had fallen pregnant with his child.'

At this, Hemmings's breath caught in his throat, and he sobbed – just once, quietly.

'Walter knew about it. He knew that it wasn't his child. He wanted so much to be a father, but Marjory wouldn't have it. I mean, it wasn't his, after all. He called her womb a "treacherous belly", because it was that that drove him to kill her.'

Peri sniffed back a tear. 'He killed the child, too, Doctor. He made sure that he did.'

The Doctor enveloped her in a hug, and looked over her shoulder at the broken form of Hemmings. 'Is this all true?' he asked the man.

Hemmings just nodded. Peri pulled herself out of the hug and turned back to the priest. 'Father, you blamed Marjory for the death of your child, didn't you?' She didn't wait for an answer. 'You knew she could have just left Walter, or at least not told him about the baby. But she didn't: she let him know all about her affair with you. That's why you couldn't forgive her. That's why you never gave her the Last Rites.'

Hemmings finally raised his head. He stared at Peri, his eyes

reddened with tears.

'These creatures,' she continued. 'The Doctor's right. They're just some beaten and battered aliens. But you're so obsessed with the fact you couldn't forgive Marjory that you're grasping at straws to find some way of making up for it.'

Hemmings didn't reply.

'You're risking the lives of your entire congregation, just to salve your bad conscience!' Peri snapped. 'There's no God in this plan, just

desperate confusion. Poison.' Peri shook her head. 'What a mess.'

Hemmings's body shuddered. A noise started up, almost just a

gurgling in his throat, but it grew and grew, to a cry, to a yell, to a keening wail which burst off the walls of the crypt and nearly deafened Peri. Hemmings fell to his knees, and his howling dropped to a series of quiet, desperate sobs.

She ran to him and knelt next to him. Taking him in her arms, she rocked him gently as he cried. The Doctor took a quick look at them
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before bending to run his device over the surface of the aliens.

'How are we going to safely dispose of the bodies?' he asked, but Peri wasn't listening. 'I mean, we can't really just throw them back into the sea...'

Hemmings was trembling in Peri's embrace. She held him still more tightly, and leant in so her mouth was close to his ear. While the Doctor wittered on about something and nothing while he paced the crypt, Peri whispered in the priest's ear.

He sniffed once or twice, then pulled himself up straight. He looked into Peri's eyes, and a smile broke across his face. He snatched back a sob, almost turning it into a laugh.

'Really?' he asked.

Peri nodded. 'I forgive you.'

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Balloon Debate

Simon A. Forward

'Is it just me or is the TARDIS a good deal smaller on the inside?'

wondered Ian.

'The Ship's interior dimensions could be collapsing!' cried Susan, her wide young eyes making frantic measurements. 'We must warn

Grandfather!'

‘The Professor’s not here,’ Ace pointed out. ‘None of him is.’

‘Oh! What can we do?’ Victoria trembled, looking for somewhere to run.

‘I say, steady on. If I know the Doctor, he’ll be breezing in to sort out this whole jolly mess right in the nick of time. Or a few minutes after, at any rate. ’

‘Yes, thank you, Harry, for those words of wisdom.’ Sarah shot him a look meant to injure that jolly expression of his, but he only shrugged off the wound, surprised.

‘Look,’ piped up Liz helpfully, trying to make herself heard without resorting to an actual shout, ‘it’s a little outside my field of expertise, but the diminished interior dimensions could have something to do with there being an awful lot of people in here.’

‘Who’re you calling an awful lot, that’s what I’d like to know!’

Tegan wasn’t prone to claustrophobia, but it was getting as stuffy as a sweatshop in here. It didn’t help that she heard Nyssa sigh behind her.

At least most people in here had the decency to get a bit fraught. But Nyssa’s sigh was soon forgotten as everybody now started talking at once, and Tegan felt a guilty twinge at the idea that her outburst had started them all off.

Steven towered ineffectually over everybody and did his best to assert some sort of calm, while Vicki and Dodo just giggled at the build-up of heat and friction from the repeated rubbing of so many egos in such a confined space.

Across the congested room Liz Shaw exchanged a despairing glance with Sarah Jane Smith. Clearly this wasn’t the effect the more sensible sorts were aiming for.

‘Mistress!’ Sarah, Leela and the two Romanas turned their heads. ‘If you would please assist me to a position of greater prominence, I will do my best to explain the situation.’

The mistresses were caught in collective indecision until Romanas I and II took it upon themselves to help K9 aloft between them.

Regarding each other with a mildly wary respect, they set him down in the armchair in the corner and he waggled his ears at the waiting assembly, as though that were correct etiquette for all storytellers preparatory to telling their tales.

'What is it, K9?' prompted Leela.

'The Doctors are indisposed facing a paradimensional force that threatens the destruction of the universe and all its parallels. The outcome is – uncertain: K9 bowed his head. 'It was their wish that you all be spared involvement in this battle and the TARDIS was

considered the safest place for you to await their return.'

'Oh aye, but it's just a wee bit crowded' Jamie searched about for some appreciation of his humour. All he got was a nudge from Zoe.

'Regrettably, simultaneous convergence of multiple timelines within the TARDIS has resulted in a catastrophic overload of the internal confrguration modulator.' K9's ears waggled rapidly, as if struggling to interpret more than twenty blank faces at once. 'The ship's interior dimensions are in a state of collapse'

Everybody started talking at once again, but Polly suddenly outdid them all for volume. 'Stop it! Stop! I can't stand any more of this!'

'Take it easy, Duchess.' Ben laid a guardian arm around her and fired a pair of angry eyes around the room. 'You lot ought to be ashamed of yerselves! Can't we all just shut up fer a moment and listen to what the dog's got to say?'

Romana II brought her face level with the dog's, 'Isn't there some way we can recalibrate the modulator for a reduced internal mass?' Her previous incarnation shook her head at her for grasping so impulsively at technical straws.

'Negative, Mistress!' K9 raised his head slowly, as Romana II turned away to start thinking her way around his negative. 'The TARDIS is diverting resources to slow the rate of collapse. Other systems are experiencing increased instability. Life support will be sufficient for only six individuals within approximately one hour.'

This time there was silence. And in it, everybody could hear the sound of twenty-four people counting bodies.

'Purge internal mass and convert it to energy for stabilisation!'

Romana II snapped her fingers like castanets, whirling about

triumphantly and looking to K9 for approval. Or a simple affirmative at the very least.

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Romana I rested a hand on her hip as if her sigh had robbed her of the strength to hold it up. ‘And how do you expect to manage that without an internal configuration modulator?’

‘Never mind arguing about all this nonsense!’ Panic had hold of Victoria and she looked to Jamie, but at the sight of him looking as lost as she did, she crumpled into sobs. ‘What are we going to do? We’re all going to die!’

Leela slapped her.

‘Well, there’s nothing else for it but a good old-fashioned balloon debate.’

‘Ian! You can’t seriously be suggesting –’

‘Barbara,’ Ian softened his voice and laid firm hands on Barbara’s arms, ‘we have to buy as much time as possible. That way at least the Doctor – one of them – might make it back to save some of us.’

‘He’s right,’ declared Jo, pausing to bite her lip. Her spaniel eyes roamed the gathered faces, reluctant to settle on anyone’s in particular.

‘The Doctor will come back, I know he will. But we can’t have any idea what he’s facing – or how long he might be.’

‘I won’t believe that’s our only option! The Doctor needs our help!’

‘Don’t be such a brat, Adric.’ Tegan sagged like she was feeling the full gravity of the situation. ‘What can you do? What can any of us do?

You heard what Romana said, and the robot dog. They keep dragging us back to face these universal threats, some of us had to reach the end of the road sooner or later.’

‘No! I won’t accept it!’ Adric whined. ‘There has to be something we can do!’ He paced halfway to the console, boyish features folded in concentration. ‘I should be able to introduce a geometric progression into the relative mass integration functions.’

‘Oh,’ Zoe tried to introduce furrows to her brow, ‘I don’t think that can be right.’

‘What do you mean, it can’t be right?’Adric rounded on her. ‘I know what I’m talking about! I’ve –’

‘Adric, please.’ Nyssa played diplomat, and patted Tegan’s arm

sympathetically. ‘At least it can’t hurt to let him try.’

Tegan shrugged her off and chewed her thumbnail. ‘Fair enough, but if he mentions his gold star for mathematical excellence I’ll ram it down his throat.’

Harry, who had, so to speak, been contemplating his naval blazer for some time, took a step forward and addressed the floor hesitantly.

‘Well, this is a rum sort of pickle and no mistake, and I have to say I thought I’d retired from all this galactic menace lark. But I think in a jam like this, well, the gentlemen ought to do the decent thing and

abandon ship in favour of the ladies.’

‘Speak for yourself,’ muttered Turlough, shoulders hunched sullenly.

‘I shall be glad to die a hero’s death!’ announced Leela, fiery resolve in her eyes and tautness in every muscle.

‘You go, girl.’ Peri offered her somewhat lethargic encouragement.

‘No, Harry. No, Leela,’ argued Sarah quietly, emotion underlining every word. ‘A balloon debate is the only proper way to go about this.’

‘Terrific,’ grouched Tegan, a belying tremor taking the edge off her sarcasm, ‘first time we get to see democracy in operation in the TARDIS and it’s to vote for who lives or dies.’

Solemn nods completed a reticent circuit of the room, like a game of pass the parcel in which no one wanted the prize.

‘You know,’ chirped a fluting, nasal sort of voice, ‘we can make this go a lot easier if we turn it into a game.’

Everybody stared unpleasantly at Mel.

The mood was subdued, time was running out and everybody kept

looking to the different doors, internal and external, hoping and praying for one of their Doctors to come, as Harry had put it, breezing in to save the day.

The doors remained heartlessly closed.

K9 perched in the armchair, patiently awaiting the first speech. By majority consensus, the intrepid, faithful little robot had been appointed adjudicator. There had been objections levelled from some quarters concerning his partiality towards the four mistresses, but K9

assured them he would remain neutral and scrupulous throughout, and that, in any case, the vote was theirs to cast.

So this was it. Hope lay in the few words they each had to put

forward.

Alphabetical order, it had been decided, was the fairest way to proceed, and so Ace was first to present her case. She presented it with baseball bat in hand. 'Look, the Professor needs me, okay, and he'd throw a serious wobbly if anyone so much as thought of dumping me in the vortex, and I'll give anyone some serious lumps if they try anything.' She relaxed a bit when nobody came at her; her expression moody and grudgingly apologetic.

Head bowed, Adric's eyes darted furiously about, chasing formulae in the air in front of him; but a few were starting to suspect the boy of procrastinating.

'Come on, Adric,' Turlough prodded him testily. 'In case it's slipped your notice, we haven't got all day!'

Suddenly, decision resolved in Adric's face, like a scanner screen brought into focus, and he trotted to the console, 'I should be able to 203

reconfigure a new modulator with a Block Transfer Computation! All it will take is a few dimensional translations!'

'Danger! System instability! Advisable to –'

Adric flicked a couple of switches before the panel blew jagged whips of energy lashed up and down his body, jerking him around in a gruesomely palsied dance. Finally, a second blast flipped him on to the TARDIS floor, still sizzling, the yellow of his tunic making him

look like an overdone omelette.

‘– maintain safe distance from electrical systems at all times.’

There was a humbled pause in the debate as the body was carried into the room that was to be ejected. Nobody needed a reminder, while debating for their place on board the TARDIS, of what was waiting for those who lost.

Ian suggested Barbara put forward a case jointly with him, but she quietly declined. ‘No, Ian, this is one time when we have to stand alone. ’ Slowly letting go of his hand, she turned to face the others.

‘All I can say is, I’ve gained such a rich experience in my travels with the Doctor – and with Ian and Susan’ – she glanced fondly back at her dear friends – ‘and I’ve lived many episodes in history I’d only ever imagined, built up in my mind from words on a page: Those

experiences are just a fraction of what you’d be throwing away. I’m a teacher and I can pass them on.’

She retreated into the welcome touch of Ian’s hands on her

shoulders.

Ben stepped up to the metaphorical microphone looking like he’d much rather be playing to a rowdy mob of matelots. ‘Don’t rightly know how to recommend meself, but I’m a dependable sort, strong pair of arms, handy in a tight spot – but I guess no better ’n Jamie in that respect – and heck, I’d even swab the TARDIS decks for me place on board. But bottom line, I go where the Duchess goes, so – well, that’s all I’m sayin’.’ And he backed up, unwilling to elaborate on where he and the Duchess might go if the vote went against them.

Dodo nudged herself forward, in awe of everybody and the whole

situation. Lips clammed tight, stuck for anything to contribute, the idea that some of the faces might be looking on her with sympathy helped her put a brave face on it. ‘Being realistic, I know people will be making jokes about “dead as a Dorothea” and all that, but I’m a fun girl and a bit of optimism always goes a long way in a pinch. And I’ve got stacks.’

‘I say, my turn already?’ Harry smoothed the front of his blazer and held a fist to his mouth as he cleared his throat. ‘Well, I know the Doctor never sang much in the way of my praises, did he, old thing?’

tad inappropriate to the occasion and got back to the matter in hand.

‘Anyway, it’s not unfair to say I’m a sporting sort of chap all round and a qualified doctor – of the medical sort. But if there are any ladies voted off, I’d be bally well sure to do the decent thing and take one of their places.’ He swept a courteous smile over each of the female faces in his audience. ‘Although I fancy I’d be stuck as to which of you lovely things to give my place on the lifeboat, so to speak.’

Leela moved in to take command of what central space was

available. She drew her knife and pointed the blade at Harry. ‘The feeble one shows courage!’ (‘I say.’ Harry murmured, reluctant to voice his protest any louder.) ‘Do not doubt that I would welcome a hero’s death also! But if I am to live, then I will fight by the Doctor’s side and die in battle against his foes! But not before I had slain as many of them as possible!’

She withdrew, leaving absolutely no doubt as to her testimony.

Although some were forced to wonder whether it might have served everybody better if Leela – and Ace, for that matter – had been disarmed prior to commencing the debate.

‘Would participants please adhere to the agreed sequence,’ insisted K9.

‘Thank you,’ said Ian. ‘I think we all expected this to be an

impassioned debate. And why wouldn’t it? Our lives are on the line.’

He faced everybody with an air that was far from resigned, but just as far from defiant. ‘No matter what Barbara says, I count myself as part of a team with her. There’s little point in singing my own praises, I just want to say I won’t sit quietly by and let her go anywhere without me.’

Barbara squeezed Ian’s hand as he stepped back into line.

Zoe considerately prodded Jamie. ‘Oh, aye,’ nodded Jamie, realising he’d spent far too much time listening to everybody else instead of preparing his own speech. Not to be outdone by a mere lass, strapping girl though she was, he fixed himself a firm expression and kept his tone serious. ‘Och, I’d pretty much go along with what yon savage lass

said. I've faced a fair few dangers with the Doctor in my time, and I suppose I was always willing to lay down my life if I had to – aye, and even afore that for the Bonnie Prince. So I guess this is nae different.'

'Oh Jamie, you could have done better than that.' Zoe berated him mournfully. But the brave lad shrugged it off.

'I suppose, um, it's me next.' Jo Grant peered mouselike around the room, her voice turning faintly squeakier as if it might scurry all the way back down her throat rather than make itself heard under such daunting circumstances. 'Well, I know the Doctor always had a special affection for me.'

'Oh, come on, we can all claim that one!' put in Sarah, unable to 205

help herself.

Jo flinched, but spurred herself on with a newfound boldness and a defensive frown. 'I've also a great deal of training and experience as a field agent, and I'm always willing to make myself useful around the lab. I can't pretend to understand all the science and everything, but I've always been jolly helpful to the Doctor in all sorts of ways.'

'Yes, well, I didn't always understand the "science and everything"

myself,' Liz pitched her sarcasm softly, and a subtle micron or two above Jo's blonde head. 'And sometimes he did have this infuriating way of making me feel like a laboratory assistant, but I think in some ways he regarded me as an equal. You know, given the same

educational background, that sort of thing – Gallifrey, instead of Cambridge – I might have given him a run for his money. And if there was ever any "science and everything" to be done, well,' she smiled one of her speciality wry smiles, 'every experiment needs a control, not to mention some safety checks.'

Sarah smiled, enjoying the humour and wanting to let Liz know she liked her. 'Um, who's up next?' she asked.

Muffled squeals emanated from one of the TARDIS store cupboards.

'Shall I let Melanie out?' Nyssa wanted to know. Unfortunately, there had been widespread agreement that Mel's happy-camper attitude ran much too counter to the gravity of the situation. Instead, Mel had been promised the chance of doing what she could for the morale of those, including herself, to be selected for expulsion from the TARDIS.

Nyssa couldn't help feeling guilty that, in Mel's absence, it was her turn to speak next.

'I'm a scientist, and I've an extensive knowledge of chemistry, biomatrix engineering, and a whole range of applied sciences. And I know that doesn't place me above any of you, but I am young, there's still plenty for me to learn. But there really hasn't been much left for me in this universe, since my world, Traken, was destroyed. So if I have to go, then I'll go quietly, and let someone else take my place.'

'Yeah, well, I'm young too,' put in Peri, not even waiting for Nyssa to stand back, 'and I'm not long out of college, so I don't have a lot to throw in here, except the towel. But I've got my whole life ahead of me, you've got to see that. You can't go throwing that away, okay.'

She sniffed and slumped against the wall, ashamed of having resorted to tears.

Polly spared her a look of sympathy, but stood tall, determined to endure her trial with dignity. She stayed within easy reach of Ben's presence behind her, shoring her up like a scaffold. 'I don't suppose I'm any better or more worthy than Peri or any others. I was only ever a secretary, and I liked a good time. But if Ben gets voted to stay, then, 206

well, I'd just like you to think about letting us stay together. That's all.'

'After you?' offered Romana I graciously.

'After you,' said Romana II. 'You only have one I.'

'I know,' considered Romana I, arching her royal brow, 'it's just that I'm anxious to avoid any wasteful duplication of effort.'

'Well I could always go ahead and you could jump in with any

supplemental notes afterwards.'

'By all means, be my guest,' invited Romana I.

Romana II thanked her with a cheery nod and took a deep breath

before making her pitch. 'We – that is, I – graduated with a triple first from the Prydon Academy, which officially puts me above the Doctor, academically speaking, and since he's not here I'm probably your best

bet to have around in a dimensional fix. And of course I do have the advantage of experience over my previous incarnation.'

'I'd just like to second everything she said,' supported Romana I.

'but it's worth noting that if one of us is going to survive, then it really ought to be the first so as to avoid any unfortunate hiccoughs in the space-time continuum.'

Romana II mouthed an ouch at what she considered a very cheap

shot, but Romana I merely arched her brow a few more degrees.

At last, it was time for Sarah Jane to take the metaphorical stand.

'For my part, I know I stowed away on the TARDIS originally, but it wasn't long before the Doctor made me feel more welcome than I'd ever felt anywhere. There was a real gleam in his eyes, a smile that went deeper than any of the lines on his face. On either of his faces.'

She grinned, recalling a few prize expressions. 'And if it hadn't been for some crisis on Gallifrey, we might still be together now. What we shared should never have had an end.'

Sarah subsided into quiet reflection, satisfied that at least some small part of her speech had touched everyone.

Steven, hands planted squarely on hips, presented as broad and

sturdy a figure as he could. 'Since others have talked about heroism, I'd just like to say I've flown in the face of danger, quite literally, more times than I'd care to count and I suppose I'm as ready as anyone to face a hero's death, if necessary.' He swallowed a lump in his throat, and held up a rather moth-eared stuffed toy. 'As long as someone wouldn't mind taking care of my panda.'

As no one volunteered immediately, Susan inched herself forward of Ian and Barbara, her task ahead making her look younger than ever. 'I don't know if it's fair to point it out or not, but I am the Doctor's granddaughter and I know he would never –'

'Well now, I know I left Gallifrey some time after him,' Romana I put in, 'but I never heard of him having any actual relatives.'

'True,' chipped in Romana II, not without some sympathy for poor

Susan, ‘for all we know, that Grandfather thing was just a term of endearment. Unless you can actually prove a blood tie...’

‘Well, I don’t have the documentary evidence on me!’ shrieked

Susan, stunned that they should even doubt her. ‘We left Gallifrey in a hurry!’

‘We believe you, Susan.’ Barbara brought her back into a huddle with herself and Ian. ‘You know we do. And Ian laid an affirming hand on the tearful girl’s shoulder.

Tegan felt like grumbling some more, but she knew everyone was in the same boat here. Brave heart, she told herself. ‘The fact is, I know I’m not a rocket scientist or any sort of soldier, but I’ve always contributed a great deal to the TARDIS crew and I know how to cope and keep a cool head in a crisis, you know? They train you for that on the airlines and ifs even more important on the TARDIS.’

‘Oh yes,’ scorned Turlough, ‘and what can you do, hand out warm towels and point us to the emergency exits?’

Tegan looked like she might throttle him with that school tie of his, but she held herself back. She shot a look at everyone, trying to keep the pleading out of her voice. ‘The Doctor always knew I had a brave heart.’ Then she fired a poisoned glare at the schoolboy. ‘Your turn, Just William.’

‘Why am I even taking part in this ridiculous charade?’ Turlough moaned, throwing up his arms and looking for a wall to bang his head against. ‘We shouldn’t be voting one another off, we should be

searching the ship for some way to fix things, or some other way out of here! Find the auxiliary control room and *do* something!’ He stuffed his hands sulkily in his pockets. ‘Instead of playing this stupid game!’

Vicki looked crestfallen, a little girl lost. ‘I was only ever a substitute granddaughter, really, so if Susan can’t make that argument stick, what chance have I got?’ By way of consolation she accepted Steven’s panda and proceeded to cuddle it like there was no tomorrow.

Victoria’s sweet face furled, and she wrung her hands anxiously. ‘I know I’ll be appealing to something as base as pity, but I’m only young, I’ve never hurt anyone, ever, and I was orphaned before I met the Doctor. My father was gunned down mercilessly by those horrible pepperpot monsters, and I had nobody in the universe until the Doctor

took me in and, well, Jamie and the Doctor are all the family I've ever had since.' Victoria broke down in tears and stepped back, trying to hide her sobs in her hands.

Everyone swallowed. Dozens of eyes had moistened simultaneously.

Zoe tipped her head and her eyebrows at cutely pensive angles, as she mulled over the problem in all seriousness. 'Thinking about it, I am

one of the smallest of us, so I wouldn't take up very much room and I'd probably require significantly less oxygen. And if the TARDIS

experiences any more problems, I'm sure I'm quite bright enough to work out some sort of solution.'

The time for campaigning was over. It was time for everybody to cast their votes.

'It'll all be over soon. We probably won't feel a thing,' said Mel. Ian and Barbara embraced, Susan huddled in close and wept; Steven

hugged Vicki who still hugged his panda; Dodo stood nearby, looking very pessimistic; Ben and Polly snogged; Jo Grant sank to the floor, sobbing; Romana II fumed, arms folded; Nyssa did her best to console an inconsolable Tegan; Pen looked around for someone, anyone, to comfort her, but Turlough was in a furious sulk and Jamie was

standing proud, competing with Leela over who could stare death in the face the longest without blinking. And Ace looked ready to clobber someone with her baseball bat. None of them seemed to have heard Mel, but her face brightened regardless. 'I know!' she said. 'We could all hold hands and sing a song!'

Everybody looked unpleasantly at Mel.

'Well, they'll all be sorely missed. It's very flattering to have received sufficient votes and everything, but I really can't say I'm all that comfortable about still being here while such a lot of delightful –'

'Oh, Harry, give it a rest.' Sarah wasn't in the mood. 'Just be grateful you're alive. Just be grateful we're all alive.' She met the gazes of the other four: Romana I standing coolly tall; Liz Shaw relieved but far from elated; Victoria dabbing her eyes with her frilled sleeves; and Zoe, a curious mix of reasoning and reflection.

There was an innocuous scrape of wood on the TARDIS floor that somehow managed to sound ominous. K9's chair had moved. The walls were inches closer.

'Warning! Danger!' shrilled the little robot dog. 'Internal collapse accelerating!'

'Of course!' assessed Romana I. 'Relative mass of the convergent timelines has increased as the interior dimensions have diminished.'

'The convergent timelines being ours, I suppose,' concluded Zoe unhappily.

'Which means what, exactly?' Harry begged to know.

Romana I sighed, looking at Harry like he was already excess baggage. 'It means,' she stressed, 'we took so long debating that the internal collapse got somewhat ahead of us. The TARDIS is no longer capable of supporting as many as six of us, isn't that right, K9?'

'Affirmative, Mistress. Estimate internal mass and life support will be sufficient to support a maximum of two individuals in approximately fifteen minutes.'

'Oh!' wailed Victoria. 'What can we do?'

Anyone for another round of debate?' suggested Liz archly, but with a definite hint of shadow under the arch.

'Good lord, we can't go through all that again' Harry examined the various reactions and found them all disappointingly similar. 'Can we?'

'Unless you've got any bright ideas?' prompted Sarah, her temper shortening in the narrowing confines of the control room.

'Well, I hate to say it, old thing, but you know I've always been a bit of a spare wheel in these sorts of situations.'

'Well, I hate to say it, Harry, but if you "old thing" me again, you won't be getting my vote this time round.'

‘What do you think, Zoe?’ Liz tried for a hopeful tone, but it just came out as urgent. ‘Is there anything else we can try?’

Romana I glanced at Zoe, but continued going over the problem as if she were looking down on it from some way above. For all her

elevated perspective, it was clear she was getting no better view.

Zoe tried even harder than ever to introduce some furrows to her brow. They still refused to show. ‘I’m sure I’ve analysed all our options, but without being able to touch the TARDIS controls, I’m afraid this might be one of those genuinely insoluble problems.’ She shrugged a petite shrug. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘If the Doctor were here, he’d know what to do,’ predicted a

frustrated Romana I.

‘If the Doctor were here, he’d probably thump the console!’ retorted an exasperated Sarah Jane Smith. Everyone looked at each other.

They thumped a panel each.

The walls crept closer.

‘Danger! Ten minutes to complete internal collapse!’

‘Well, don’t feel bad, anyone,’ said Liz, ‘it was worth a try. So,’ she added, aware her next words were going to go down like a lead

balloon, ‘who wants to go first?’

When it came to Victoria, she could only cry her angelic tears and hope against hope that they melted a few hearts.

Fortunately – or unfortunately, depending on whose viewpoint you took – none of them had very much to add to their original pitch, and all too soon, they were casting their final votes.

Sarah and Victoria regarded each other across the control console. So it had come down to this, thought Sarah: her survival versus the life of a sweet and innocent child. Hobson’s horrid choice.

‘We can’t possibly vote!’ cried Victoria. ‘It would just be a

stalemate!'

'Well what do you suggest? Flip a coin? There isn't room in here to do that!'

Tempers were getting very frayed. K9 perched as arbitrator on the central column. His ears waggled rapidly as though trying to keep up with the heated exchange. Suddenly, his ears stopped and he extended his muzzle-blaster. Sarah stared, wondering if her faithful little dog was about to make the terrible choice himself. Then he did.

He blasted a great, smoking hole in Victoria's delicate little waist.

The sweet and innocent child crumpled to what was left of the control room floor. Wires sparked and flailed from the gaping wound.

Victoria blurred and dissolved away, to reveal the prostrate form of Kamelion, flapping like a landed fish.

Sarah was a while taking it all 'Oh, Kamelion, what a low trick!'

'How else would I have stood a chance?' croaked the feeble robot, electronically.

'But you don't even need life support – do you?'

'I draw power – from the TARDIS, just as – you breathe oxy – gen –

' The robot's voice crackled with static. 'It's why – I always remained

– on board.' The last semblance of life fizzled out of him and he lay there like so much scrap metal.

'K9! How did you know?'

'I have just received a communication from the Doctor, Mistress. He knew when he went to confront the paradimensional being he would not be able to return to this universe and limitations on mass

displacement between parallel realities meant he could only take one companion to accompany him. He sends his regrets, but he chose to take Miss Victoria.'

'Of course,' sighed Sarah, with misty understanding. 'He always did have a really special affection for her.'

And the little dog laughed to see such fun and the dish ran away with

the spoon.

‘What do you think, K9?’

‘Mistress? You wish me to subject text to a full grammatical and syntactical analysis, or attempt to assess material for literary merit?’

‘Oh, gracious, no.’ Sarah laughed softly at the thought. ‘It’s only a silly bit of fluff to help me break this block I’ve been struggling horribly over this article for the anniversary issue of *Columbine* magazine.’

‘The piece has therapeutic value?’

‘Oh yes, very much.’ Sarah allowed herself an amused little hmm. ‘I

might have done poor Harry a disservice; I’m sure he would have insisted on giving up his place for one of the ladies. Mind you, I think I’ve done the rest of them justice, with a bit of imaginative guesswork for the ones I never met. Still, that was the point of the exercise, to get the old creative gears working again.’

‘Mistress?’

‘I mean I think I’m ready to crack on with some real writing. Thank you, K9.’

‘Gratitude is unnecessary mistress.’ The little dog whirred. ‘But welcome.’

‘Good boy.’

Sarah patted his robot head and chuckled quietly to herself. She leafed through the pages one last time before dropping them in the bin.

Given the ‘literary merit’ of the piece, she quietly hoped K9 might incinerate the thing later.

All the same, she figured there was no harm in keeping the file on her hard drive. Just in case she was ever in need of a quiet chuckle from time to time.

A Long Night

Alison Lawson

Joan crossed off the date on her calendar, which hung on the kitchen wall next to a photograph of her daughter. Today was 23 November 1964 – a whole year since Barbara had disappeared. It had been a very difficult day and Joan knew she wouldn't sleep tonight, but would lie awake thinking.

A year ago today she had said goodbye to Barbara in the morning at about 8 a.m. As usual, Barbara had been clutching bags full of 'stuff' –

students' work that she had spent the previous evening marking, textbooks, the previous day's *Evening Standard*. ('There's a great article in here for the students,' she had said, 'I must take it in for them tomorrow and discuss it.') She was like that, Barbara. Always thinking of the students. Joan smiled as she remembered Barbara suddenly reappearing at the front door as she'd forgotten something. She had hared up the stairs to her bedroom and come back with a hardback book about the French Revolution that she'd promised to lend to a student.

Joan knew all about the students. She knew the ones that Barbara liked – the ones that were keen on history or who were fun to teach or who were 'live wires' in the classroom. Actually, Barbara had liked all her students, even the difficult ones. She had often spoken about the student who was borrowing the French Revolution book – Susan

Foreman her name was – as she was bright and fun but seemed to have very strange gaps in her knowledge. Joan had thought that this Susan was just being deliberately difficult, but Barbara had always disagreed.

Switching off the kitchen light, Joan climbed the stairs to the landing, her cup of cocoa in one hand and the newspaper in the other.

She had to walk past Barbara's room to get to her own and, tonight, she decided to go in and sit for a while on Barbara's bed. It made her feel closer to her daughter, somehow, to be surrounded by her things. Joan sat on the bed and placed the cocoa on a mat on the bedside table. She looked around, thinking. The room was as Barbara had left it, with one or two small changes. Joan changed the sheets on the bed every now and then, in case Barbara came back. Her clothes, no use to the police 213

any more, were all laundered and tidied away. Although Joan dusted the desk and the bedside table, she never moved the papers and books that were piled up there. Barbara had always been a very organised

young woman, so her papers were not untidy – they were in neat, labelled piles. The book beside her bed – Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* – still had the bookmark in it where she had reached almost to the end.

Joan cast her mind back to the evening of 23 November the previous year. Barbara was expected home by 5 p.m. as usual, and Joan had put the kettle on so they could have their customary tea and chat before dinner. By 6 p.m., Joan had started to worry a little. It wasn't like Barbara to be late home without telephoning from the school to let her mother know.

Assuming that something had come up – a student who needed help after school or a staff meeting or maybe a parent turning up at the end of the day to discuss a student's work or health – Joan got on with the dinner, expecting to hear Barbara's key in the front door at any moment.

It had been a very foggy evening, Joan remembered. The school

wasn't far away and Barbara usually walked there and back, saying it wasn't worth taking the bus. At 7 p.m. Joan left a note for Barbara in the kitchen and walked to the school. It was locked and dark. Barbara clearly wasn't there. Returning home, Joan felt worry rising in her like a physical thing, forcing her heart to beat more quickly and her hands to become clammy. That night had been the worst of Joan's life.

Of course, the next day, when the police were informed, it was

quickly discovered that it wasn't only Barbara who had gone missing, but also Mr Chesterton, the science teacher. Joan had told the police everything she could remember about the morning of 23 November, including the fact that Barbara had loaned a book to one of the students that day. This had seemed insignificant until it was discovered that the student in question was also missing and that the address she had given the school was false.

Barbara had last been seen, by another member of the Coal Hill

School staff, leaving the school with Mr Chesterton in his car. The speculation and rumours had been almost unbearable for Joan. The gossips in the staff room had decided that Barbara had eloped with this Mr Chesterton. This was preposterous! For one thing, Barbara had hardly ever mentioned the man to her mother, not in a romantic way.

Yes, she had admired him, respected him and they had been friends,

but that was all. And for another thing, well, Barbara just wasn't that sort of girl.

The police investigation had eventually led nowhere. Barbara was a 214

happy, well-adjusted young woman who had no reason to disappear and who had engagements pencilled in her diary, both at work and at home, for the weeks ahead. She had not mentioned to anyone at all that she was in any way unhappy or planning to go away. Mr Chesterton, too, seemed to have very little reason to go missing. His home life was more of a mystery, as he lived on his own in a small flat about ten minutes' drive from the school. He had had no wife, but had seemed popular with his students and with colleagues. His car had been found outside the fake address that Susan Foreman had given the school.

After a couple of months, the landlord of his flat re-let the property.

Joan didn't know what had happened to Mr Chesterton's belongings, but that was hardly a priority for her.

The missing student had been rather more difficult to investigate, as people seemed to know so little about her. Very few of the other students knew her – they all said she was a bit odd. And, of course, if she had a family somewhere, they certainly weren't living in Totter's Lane.

The search of the house had been one of the lowest points for Joan.

To have strangers go through all her daughter's private and personal belongings was heart-rending. Joan had watched as two police officers went through every pocket of every piece of Barbara's clothing, felt along all the hems, searched through her chest of drawers. It was degrading, making Joan feel even more desolate than she did already.

Once the officers had found Barbara's diary, they sealed it in a forensic bag and took it away with them. Joan had imagined the officer in charge, back at the police station, poring over the diary, reading all sorts of nonsense into Barbara's brief notes about meeting friends for coffee or going to the cinema at weekends. The officers asked

questions, too, about the book Barbara had been reading. They clearly had very little time for the new feminist thoughts and pictured Barbara as some kind of radical subversive, ready to strike out on her

own. Joan had despaired – they were right that Barbara was strong minded, but subversive? They seemed to get further from the truth the harder they searched for it. Joan had explained that a friend of Barbara's had gone to teach in America for a year on an exchange programme and had sent this book back as she felt Barbara would be interested. This had only made things worse, as the police tried to fit yet another theory round this new fact.

Many theories had been suggested, most of them scandalous. The

local newspaper had enjoyed the mystery on its doorstep and had made much of the fact, that none of the missing people was married. Scandal sold so many more copies of the paper than concern, Joan had thought angrily. There was anger, too, in the community. How could two well-215

respected teachers run off and desert their students? How had people with such a lack of responsibility been employed at Coal Hill in the first place? The more time went by and there was no sign of the three missing people, the more plaintive Joan's insistence that there had to be a simple explanation had seemed. How could people just disappear into thin air like that?

A trip to the shops became torturous. Joan imagined people stared at her and talked behind her back. 'That's the mother of the missing teacher – you know, the one who ran off with the science teacher.'

Maybe people had stared and talked, but Joan had never stopped to find out. The last thing she wanted to do was cause a scene in a local shop. 'Of course she didn't "run off" with him,' she wanted to shout.

'Why would she do that? If they ran off together why did they take the girl with them?' Instead, Joan kept herself to herself. Better not to give them anything else to gossip about.

In the months that had followed – over Christmas and the long

winter – Joan had felt all the emotions she considered possible for humans to feel, and had run through every possibility of her daughter's whereabouts in her mind. She had felt anger and anguish that Barbara had not even telephoned, but she knew her daughter better than

anyone. She was kind and sensible and reasonable, caring and, when appropriate, serious. She would have phoned if she could have done.

Joan refused to believe, as the police did, that Barbara simply did not want to be found or, the dreadful alternative, that she was dead. No, Joan believed that Barbara would return one day and have a reasonable explanation for her long absence. Joan had to believe this. It had taken a long time to settle on this thought, but in the end it was the one that kept her going.

By the spring most people seemed to have forgotten all about the missing school teachers. They had both been replaced at Coal Hill School and the students were getting on with their studies. The gossips had found other subjects for discussion and the police had scaled down their investigation to allow for work on other, more recent cases. Only Joan remembered and hoped. Every time she returned home from the shops or the church or a walk in the park, there was a small hope that she would find Barbara sitting in the kitchen, waiting, ready to explain what had happened. Joan had thought that this feeling would disappear after a while, but it hadn't.

Joan left Barbara's bedroom and went to her own room. She settled herself in bed with her cocoa and the crossword, hoping she would soon feel sleepy. Half an hour later, the crossword completed and the cocoa finished, Joan lay awake in bed. She pictured Barbara's face as she left the house that last time – her smile wide, her eyes happy. It

was hard to know that a whole year had gone by without word from her daughter. She lay awake for a long while, but eventually, Joan slept.

Barbara woke in her room in the TARDIS with a smile on her face.

Gently, the smile faded. She sat up and closed her eyes, trying to hold the dream images in her mind for a few seconds longer. The images, and the feelings that went with them, were soon gone, however, and Barbara sighed. By the time she had washed and dressed the dream was gone – but not forgotten.

Barbara walked into the console room, where she found the Doctor bent over the Astral Map, apparently dusting it with his handkerchief.

He noticed her and looked up.

'Ah, good morning Barbara.'

'Good morning,' she replied. It seemed odd to observe night and day in a ship that could travel anywhere in space and time, but observe it

they did. Apart from the Doctor, that is – he never seemed to sleep.

Something in Barbara's tone had made the Doctor look at her more closely. 'Are you all right, my dear? Is there something troubling you?'

'No,' said Barbara. 'Well, nothing important.'

The Doctor raised his eyebrows questioningly and waited for

Barbara to continue.

'It's just that I had such a vivid dream last night,' she said finally.

'The pictures and the voices were so clear, so exact, so powerful, that I really felt that the dream had been real. It's silly, isn't it?'

The Doctor passed no comment on whether or not he thought this

was silly. Instead he asked what it was that Barbara had dreamed about.

'My mother,' she said. 'I dreamed I was at home with my mother

and we were just sitting in the kitchen, chatting over a cup of tea. It was like a very ordinary day, as if I were telling her all about what had happened at work that day, but instead I talked to her all about what I was doing now. I told her I was safe and that one day I'd come back.'

Barbara faltered, then smiled. 'She seemed happy as we said goodbye and she said that she was waiting for me at home.'

The Doctor looked a bit awkward at this, but said nothing. As

Barbara continued, he smiled and nodded.

'I've had dreams of home before,' Barbara said, 'but this was so much more powerful than usual.'

'Well, my dear,' said the Doctor. 'You do know that the Ship has some telepathic capability, hmm? Yes, I wouldn't be at all surprised if your mother hasn't had exactly the same dream at the same time. No, not surprised at all!'

'Do you really think so, Doctor?'

‘Yes, it’s quite likely, in my opinion,’ he confirmed.

‘Good,’ said Barbara. ‘Then she knows I’m safe. And we will get back one day, won’t we, Doctor?’

‘Oh yes, I’m sure you will one day,’ said the Doctor comfortingly, although his eyes betrayed a worry that this was nothing more than an empty reassurance. ‘One day,’ he said.

Barbara closed her eyes, thought of her mother, and smiled.

Joan woke with a smile and turned over in bed to check the time on her alarm clock. She had woken before the alarm, as she often did. She was surprised at how well she had slept, after all. Then, gradually, her dream came back to her. Barbara was all right. She was safe and well, and having great adventures, seeing all the wonders of history – and of the future, too – with good friends. A surge of feeling welled up inside her and Joan laughed and cried at the same time. She knew she had been right all along – one day Barbara would come home.

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